

Faith MATTERS

by Thomas G. Long

Feedback frenzy

PERHAPS IT'S self-flattery, but I'm wondering why everyone wants my opinion these days. Hardly a day goes by that I am not asked to share my judgment of some product, experience or person. The deep discount airport hotel where I bunked for a few hours between flights last month wants me to rate my room (the TV was broken and there was a faint odor of rotting cabbage). Amazon invites me to spout my opinions of books and to flag other people's reviews as "helpful" or not. Facebook lets me pretend to be a Roman emperor who sends posters to their fate with a thumbs up or a thumbs down. The *Huffington Post* inquires whether I find its religion essays "amazing," "inspiring," "hot" or "weird," while Delta Airlines wonders if I had a "satisfactory gate experience" in Denver and if the gate agent called me by name (wait, let me check my diary).

It is tempting to see this rush to solicit my views as a sign that megacorporations are finally getting serious about customer service, that someone at headquarters truly cares whether my hotel bed was comfortable, and that a Delta manager might actually call Denver to say, "His name is Tom Long. Don't forget next time." But somehow I doubt that. The constant badgering for my opinion seems less about service and more about sales. If I can be persuaded that someone cares what I think, I can be lulled into believing that I am rowing my little consumer boat with purpose and direction and that companies are carving out safe harbors for my whims. In fact I am being swept along a churning Niagara River of marketing ploys and corporate indifference. I'm grinning and flashing a thumbs up even as I plunge over the falls.

I wonder about the larger cultural meaning of being summoned to make flash judgments about everything from restaurant entrées to couples on *Dancing with the Stars*. How healthy can it be to think of life not as something to be lived and savored, but as a series of episodes that I am expected—and entitled—to rate up or down? Moreover, the cloak of anonymity on the Internet can summon our worst spirits. "Our waiter was a rude jerk. Fire him," posted a cranky diner. When CNN recently ran a moving feature about the personal life and struggles of one of America's most respected ministers, a reader commented, "Yawn. God is not real. Jesus is not real. This dude's whole life was based on a lie. Next story." Are we being turned into toddlers who dump our applesauce onto the floor, screaming, "Don't like! Don't like!"?

It seems trivial to think that Jesus would care about any of this, but I think Jesus was concerned about the role of judgment in forming our personal and social character. When he

warned, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged," he was not thinking about rental cars or cell phone service, but he was speaking to our tendency to make judgment a sharp edge on our character, an inclination to filter the whole of life through narrow judgmental slits.

It is neither possible nor desirable to go through life without making any judgments. When we consider Jesus' full statement on the matter, though, it turns out that he is not prohibiting judgment but tempering it, reframing it. Yes, he does say, "Judge not," but he follows that immediately with a process, namely, taking the log from our own eye before removing the speck in another's. "Judge not" is not a stop sign; it's a flashing yellow caution light: when you judge, judge not as the culture does. Don't leave yourself and a proper humility out of the equation. Before publicly smearing mud all over a waiter, remember that you stand knee-deep in the muck and mire yourself.

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There is also an eschatological breeze blowing through Jesus' word on judgment, which means, among other things, that no experience or encounter can be fully assessed in the present tense. Until God gathers up all time, we don't know the whole value or meaning of any isolated moment. As the spiritual says, "Oh, nobody knows who I am, who I am, till the Judgment Morning." Even in something as routine as a brief encounter with a hotel desk clerk or a waiter, life is so textured, so nuanced, so rich with the possibility for discovery, so full of gift and grace, so mysterious and charged with intimations of the coming reign of God, that it is at least premature and at worst a sin to flatten it into thumbs-up, thumbs-down judgments.

So the next time Delta asks me to evaluate a gate agent, I'll need to give the matter more thought. It might puzzle them when I respond, "I won't know until Resurrection Day." Or maybe I'll log on as Julian and respond, "All will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well."

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