

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

February 24, 2019

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 6:27-38)

[Jesus said:] “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, today we jump into the deep end of Christian practice.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

It’s hard, and it’s scary, and it’s dangerous. So I’m not going to start there. I want to start at the other end. Almost the opposite of where we’re going. Let’s start with customer reviews.

Customer reviews. They've been around forever. Right? It used to be by word of mouth. "I just ate at this great restaurant." Or, "I saw this movie that was so bad!"

But lately it has become an artform with the spread of the online review. We're asked if a movie is fresh or if it's rotten. "Tell us about your recent flight on Delta. How did we do?" "Please leave a review of the purchase you just made on Etzy." "Vote for your favorite performer on America's Got Talent." Even Facebook invites us to offer constant thumbs-up or thumbs-down, along with other emoji options.

Surrounded by all of these invitations for my opinion, I'm tempted to believe that all of these really care about what I have to say. I begin to believe that they are carefully reading my responses and will respond to my slightest whim. It makes me feel like I have real influence and power. I can make them better, or I can destroy them with a word.

And then, I remember that Delta is asking the opinion of both me and the other five hundred thousand people they serve each day. And asking for a review has much more to do with their marketing than with my influence. And I begin to wonder if the constant clamor for our opinion can tempt us to believe that we are in control, that we have power, that we can have what we want. And then our lives become this never-ending series of episodes that either delight or offend us, that we can rate up or rate down. Always wanting more, wanting better, wanting to be pleased.

But what if – what if there's more to the story than I see? What if I knew more about what was happening with that restaurant server, or that airline steward, before I judged them wanting and wrote my review? What if I knew more than just this moment? What would I say then?

I recently this in a novel, of all places:

"It's easy to judge other people's choices. The mother with a grocery cart full of Froot Loops and Double Stuf Oreos who yells at her child. The driver of an expensive convertible who cuts off a slower vehicle. The woman in the quiet coffee shop who yaks loudly on her cell phone. But what if you knew that the mother had lost her job that day? What if the driver had promised his son he'd make it to his school play, but his boss had insisted he attend a last-minute meeting? What if the woman in the coffee shop had just received a phone call from the love of her life, a man who had broken her heart?"

What if we knew the whole story? What if we could consider more than just an isolated incident? Did more than just give a review?

Today, as Jesus teaches his disciples, we hear him say: *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned."* As I hear that, I wonder if Jesus is doing more than just giving us rules to live by. What if he's inviting us to see beyond what I want – beyond the review or the snap judgment – to a bigger story?

Can we see real people in God's amazing world, instead of objects to constantly be judged and reviewed?

"But," you say, "the woman in the grocery store still yelled at her kids. And bad driving is not okay." True. And I don't think Jesus was saying, "Everything is okay." And "Give it a break." And, "Don't call out evil." He never said that.

And he certainly did not act that way. Jesus tore up the temple and its unfair practices. He called out the Pharisees for their exclusion and self-righteousness. But, in all of it, his point was never getting what he wanted or putting them in their place. It was always, always pointing to a greater purpose. Jesus always spoke about the world God was bringing to be. He always invited, even the Pharisees, he invited into a beautiful world where all people are honored and included.

Our lives are not episodes to be judged or reviewed. They are part of a larger purpose, a hidden wholeness, that God is bringing to be – with us, through us, sometimes despite us. But we are always invited into that wholeness. We can always invite others into that wholeness as well. To step out of the shallows and swim in the deep end of Christian practice.

For an example, take a look at that story from the First Reading today, the story of Joseph. You may have heard about Joseph and his multicolored coat. It's that Joseph. But that's just the beginning of the story. Joseph starts out as – well, he starts as a self-centered jerk. Let's just be clear on that. He's daddy's favorite. He has some skills at interpreting dreams, but he rubs it in his brothers' faces. "Dad loves me best." "I'm going to grow up to be better than all of you. You will be bowing down to me." You can almost sympathize with the brothers when they decide to murder him. But they end up instead selling him as a slave to Ishmaelites, who don't want him either, so they sell him to the Egyptians.

It's not until later, when Joseph finds himself in prison, through no fault of his own, that he begins to see beyond himself. He begins to use his abilities for the sake of others, and eventually finds himself in the service of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. He rises to a position of power and authority. And one day he finds himself standing in front of his brothers, although they don't know it, the brothers who tried to kill him, the brothers who are now helpless in the midst of a famine. They are starving, and they come to the great Pharaoh for help.

If Joseph was still the man he once was, if he was still focused on what pleased him and what built him up, he would have done away with them or, at best, handed them some food and sent them home. But Joseph has learned something. He has learned to look for God's purposes being worked out in the world. He has learned to look ahead to what God intends. He says it not once but three times in today's reading:

*"For God sent me before you to preserve life."
"God sent me before you to preserve you as a remnant."
"It was not you who sent me here, but God."*

Joseph recognizes that the most important thing is for God's great hopes for this world to come to pass. And he can be a part of that. Even though his brothers had hurt him, they can be invited into God's future. He saw that they, too, could be part of that hidden wholeness that God intends for this world. And so he named their fault, he spoke what they had done to him, but then he forgave them. He kissed his brothers and wept upon them.

Let me give you a slightly more recent example. In the early eighties, the world woke up and started speaking out against a form of government in South Africa that legalized racism, called apartheid. Blacks were forced to live in townships. They had to have passes to travel. There was very little work available.

One of the faces of the resistance to apartheid was a small, soft-spoken priest named Desmond Tutu. In 1983, then Pastor Tutu was speaking at the World Council of Churches. And while he was there, a resolution came up before the body about the system of apartheid, condemning it, and asking that it end. Tutu walks to a microphone to speak. He quietly thanked those who had created the resolution and the assembly for receiving it. And then he said this:

"I have only one concern about the resolution. I note the absence of any expression of love for our white South African brothers and sisters, even those who support the existing unjust policy that is so destructive to my people and our nation. We, of course, want change; indeed, we must have change. But we want our oppressors to know that, even though we oppose their policies, we wish them no ill. Fairness and just treatment for all people in South Africa is all we want. And when this policy is eventually overturned, we want to work side by side with all South Africans toward peace and reconciliation in our nation."

Tutu continued to invite his enemies into God's wholeness.

Loving our enemies is swimming in the deep end of Christian practice. It does not come easily or fast. It took Joseph most of a lifetime to focus on God's purposes and be able to forgive his brothers. It took the people of South Africa generations to start moving to a just society together.

But God, who loves us, is always inviting us into a more beautiful world where we are seen and connected. Christ is always working in love, even in the darkest moments, to steer us toward joy.

God will always lead us to life. And when we trust that, we can learn to love.

Amen.