

“Looking for Jesus in Others”

A sermon¹ by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Matthew 7:1-5 ¹Do not judge others, so that God will not judge you, ²for God will judge you in the same way you judge others, and he will apply to you the same rules you apply to others.
- Amos 5:21-24 ²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

That’s a pretty harsh reading to hear, those verses from the prophet Amos: “The Lord says, ‘I hate your religious festivals; I cannot stand them!’”[^]

Amos preached to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, about the middle of the 8th century B.C. It was a time of great prosperity, notable religious piety, and apparent security. But Amos saw that prosperity was limited to the wealthy, and it fed on injustice and on oppression of the poor. Religious observance was insincere, and security more apparent than real.²

Even though the words of Amos were written about 800 years before the time of Jesus, I think those ancient words express the attitude Jesus desired in his followers — that seeking justice for all and living as righteously as humanly possible should be twin goals for each of us. The themes of justice and righteousness prompt me to remember two incidents in Jesus’ life that Matthew’s gospel describes.

In the first, in his “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus said, “No one lights a lamp and hides it under a basket; no, they would put it on a stand where it would throw its light throughout the house.” [Jesus continued,] “In the same way, let your own light so shine before others that they will see your good works, and praise your Heavenly Father.”³ So our own good works not only benefit the recipients; our good works also direct proper praise to God, since God is the source of our desire to be good and do good.

The other passage from Matthew’s gospel that comes to mind about seeking justice and righteousness is the passage often known by the title “The Final Judgment.” It’s where people ask Jesus, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or lonely, and cared for you?” Remember his reply? “Whatever you do for even the least influential among you, it’s as though you were doing that very thing for me.”⁴

It’s from this passage that some people have suggested that we should seek the face of Jesus in every person we encounter. For

--if we seek the face of Jesus in the rude shopper in the store...

--if we seek the face of Jesus in the child who has been disobedient yet again...

--if we seek the face of Jesus in the inconsiderate neighbor...

if we try to look for Jesus in others, then we are more likely to respond to such persons in a manner that would please God and make Jesus smile. We’re more likely to respond in a

¹ Modified from my sermon originally preached January 15, 2006 under the title “...The Face is Familiar”

² From introduction to Amos, Good News Bible: the Bible in Today’s English Version. New York: American Bible Society, 1976, p. 990

³ Matthew 5:16-16

⁴ See Matthew 25:31-46

way that is *just* rather than reactionary, to respond in a way that is *righteous* rather than self-serving.

During this weekend our nation observes a federal holiday commemorating the work and sacrifice of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His was a life and ministry lived on behalf of our nation's most basic ideals. This anniversary challenges us to assess how we've been doing in seeking justice that rolls down like waters, and living with righteousness that flows like an ever-flowing stream. Have we been universal in our efforts toward justice and righteousness? Or have we been selective, deciding on our own that "certain kinds of people" are or are not deserving of particular treatment or opportunities?

In the classic Broadway musical "South Pacific," Lieutenant Cable states his belief that a desire for justice and righteousness is probably God-given gift at birth, inherent in the human being, but that we *learn* to prejudice and discriminate. With penetrating sarcasm in the haunting song "You've Got to be Carefully Taught," Lieutenant Cable sings:

*You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!*

Some of us are never going to change our prejudicial attitudes. It's a sad thing, but true. Some of us will go to the grave believing ugly, hurtful falsehoods like Jews are dishonest, Roman Catholics are married to the Mob, Muslims hate everyone except their own, Mexicans are lazy, Germans are control freaks, that Chinese are ruthless. For that matter, some of us will never find a kind word to say about the New York Yankees, or Pittsburgh Steelers, or Michigan Wolverines. Oh yes, team loyalties based on demonizing the opposition and their fans may seem amusing at first. But such mindsets are not that different from prejudicial attitudes toward Eastern Europeans or African Americans or Hispanics or Asians.

Let us pray that, by God's grace, our cold, hard hearts will be melted, and recast in the mold of the heart of Jesus Christ. Let us pray that we will become mindful of our biases, that we will allow the tide of God's love to wash away our prejudices like sandcastles on the shore. Because of our faith we believe that we *can* be changed.

And let's be sure to place our energies toward the youngest generation, too. Recalling that song from "South Pacific," rather than "teach them our hates" before their birthdays of six, seven, or eight, let's make a way, a path for them so they can walk arm in arm with other children of any race, any religion, any nationality or culture, regardless of education level or gender identity or family income, and yes, even without regard to what sports teams they root for. It can be done. By welcoming God's gracious gift of humility and compassion, we can do it.

Prejudice may be efficient in enabling people to make judgments about others at a glance, but prejudice is not effective in bringing the world together. Justice is the fair treatment of all persons irrespective of any conditions unrelated to a situation at hand. Righteousness is doing all we can to do what is right in God's eyes. When we look for the face of Jesus in every single person we encounter — whether a stranger, an acquaintance, a neighbor, or even a relative — we will contribute to the fulfillment of the Lord's desire that "justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."