

JUST AS YOU ARE?

(07/23/17)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 7:36-50

“Then, turning toward the woman, Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman?’” (Luke 7:44)

I have received a lot of positive feedback regarding my Father’s Day sermon. I like positive feedback, but that’s not the point. People told me they could relate to W. Livingston Larned’s little reflection entitled *Father Forgets*. Apparently the themes of criticism, even criticism that is intended to improve someone, to “make them better” touched many of you.

Some of you were also interested in how this theme speaks to our relationship with God. In the sermon, if you recall, we entertained the possibility that God is not dissatisfied with us; God loves us as we are. God may not be dissatisfied with the world; God may love it just as it is.

If this is true, and I believe it is, then perhaps *we* should be more accepting of life and our life circumstances, even those life circumstances that are painful. It may not be our sacred duty to criticize life, to judge it, and to try to change it. I’m not saying that our criticisms are not justified; in many cases they are. I’m just suggesting that our deepest calling may be not to criticize and try to change, but to accept and try to love.

This approach to life runs up against common sense. Not only life but also many people stand in obvious need of improvement. I remember struggling with this strange way of thinking when, as an undergraduate, I found myself struggling with the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s assertion that this may be the best of all possible worlds.

I remember thinking, “This guy must be on crack! How can this possibly be the best of all possible worlds? I can think of a million ways that it could be improved. And if there are a million ways that it can be improved, how can it possibly be the best?”

It seems to me that many people are unhappy with life and/or with other people. They are unhappy *with the way things are*. They are critical of a life that is not as they would like it to be. They are critical of other people who are not as they would like them to be. They have an imaginary picture, an ideal picture of the way things should be. Because reality differs from their ideal, they become angry. Their unhappiness arises not from the world *as it is* but from their attitude toward the world: it is not as they would like it to be.

Our desire for change may be grounded in caring, in love. We would like the people on our prayer list to be healed, and we become depressed when this doesn’t happen. We want wars

to cease. We don't want our loved ones to die; we simply can't accept a life or a God that can allow this to happen. We would like to change our parents, our spouse, our children. Some would even like to change their pastor. More than a few of us would like to change our government.

When we project this change or progress-centered dynamic onto God, we assume that God is depressed and angry because human beings have not turned out the way he wanted. We probably don't match God's picture of what we should be and, though we have had thousands of years to work on it, we have failed to create the kingdom of God on earth. We have misused the precious gift of free will. We have worshipped idols, including ourselves. God has ample reason to be angry with us.

And yet, as illustrated in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus tells us that God is a loving parent who accepts us and loves us just as we are.

Around the same time I was reading Spinoza, I also read Herman Hesse's novels *Journey to the East* and *Siddhartha*. These books drew me to the study of Eastern philosophy in an attempt to understand how ancient India and China viewed the world and life. I say *ancient* China, because I am not impressed by how modern China, with its philosophy of atheistic materialism, views life. I resonate more with the Confucianism and Taoism of Jesus' time, a time when Hinduism and Buddhism were alive and flourishing in India and Tibet.

As you know, I don't see Christianity, Tibetan Buddhism, and Taoism as competing religions, but as different spiritual disciplines. I am interested in the unique perspective that each brings to bear on the spiritual journey, and also on what they have in common.

When I immerse myself in a different culture, as our family did when we lived for a year in Germany thirty years ago, it helps me to gain perspective on my own culture. It shows me parts of my own culture, my own religion and values that may need attention or development.

Here in the West we have a high level of consciousness. This has led to the development of science and technology. We stand apart from nature. We are good at judging, criticizing, and improving. We are never satisfied, never finished with our quest to produce a better life. In the words of the General Electric commercial, "Progress is our most important product."

This approach has its advantages, advantages that I celebrate. We have a high standard of living here in the West. Believe me, it's high. If you haven't been to Nepal, where the *per*

capita annual income is under \$200, you don't know how high. We have a high standard of living--at least materially.

The East, on the other hand, lives closer to the unconscious. Eastern religions grasp our connection with nature, our unity with nature. They believe the goal is not to dominate and control nature, but to live in harmony with her and with all living creatures. The goal is acceptance, not judging. Lao Tsu, the ancient Chinese mystic said,

*When people see some things as beautiful,
other things become ugly.
When people see some things as good,
other things become bad.*

It is our judgment that makes things beautiful or ugly, good or bad. Lao Tsu calls us to eschew judgments that we might see and accept and love things just as they are.

Our economy is grounded in competition. We ensure that no one monopolizes a given field, preventing healthy competition. Lao Tsu, on the other hand, said,

*When you are content to be simply yourself
and don't compare or compete,
everybody will respect you.*

The East emphasizes cooperation rather than competition. When we don't compare or compete, we are at peace within ourselves and then can be at peace with others and with life.

The West emphasizes progress. Our ancestors came to this country to make a better life for themselves and their families. The East teaches that the world should not be seen as in need of constant improvement; it is fine just the way it is. As Lao Tsu said,

*Do you want to improve the world?
I don't think it can be done.
The world is sacred.
It can't be improved.
If you tamper with it, you'll ruin it.
If you treat it like an object, you'll lose it.*

This perspective or philosophy of life sounds strange to us in the West. However, when I open my heart to Jesus' teaching in this morning's scripture lesson, I am led to wonder if this is how God looks at the world, how God looks at us: the way a good parent looks at his/her child.

In Mr. Larned's reflection, he suddenly realizes that the way he was looking at his son, the way he was seeing his son, was hurtful and potentially harmful. How should a parent look at

a child? How does God look at a child? Jesus suggests that God, as a good and loving parent, doesn't look at the child as a work in progress, as something that needs to be improved.

Lao Tsu would say that there is nothing wrong with Mr. Larned's son; he is perfect just as he is. He's not an unfinished or unformed adult; he's a child, a little boy. Lao Tsu would tell us that we shouldn't view our children as objects in need of change, in need of improvement. We need to see them and love them for the beautiful little miracles that they are. If we accept them and love them as they are, this doesn't mean they will never grow, change, or evolve. Of course they will. We are just providing a better base, a better foundation for their life journey.

Some streams of Christian theology split life into opposites. God is good and we humans are sinful and fallen. Heaven is good; earth is the realm of Satan. Spirit is good; the body is bad. We are not acceptable to God as we are. We need to be corrected, improved. We need to be redeemed, sanctified and purified. Then God will accept us and love us.

According to this theological perspective, not only we but also the world needs to be changed, improved, and perfected. We have been given the mandate to dominate nature, to have dominion over it. At times we forget that we are a part of it. This way of thinking has led to the destruction of our environment as we poison that of which we are a vital and living part.

The Buddhists would tell us that this world isn't fallen; it is an incarnation of the Great Spirit of the Universe. We are not fallen; we are incarnations of God. Things are fine just the way they are. We are fine just the way we are. We are what we are. This doesn't mean we won't grow and change. It just means that this evolution will take place from a different base.

Jesus tells us that God is like a good parent. A bad parent tells you that you are not good enough. You are not living up to your potential, not living up to expectations. A good parent tells you that you are loved just as you are. You should be yourself uniquely, for this is what God wants you to be. In the words of a popular poster, "God doesn't make junk." You are not junk in need of redemption. You are part of the world God created and declared to be very good.

I remember watching Mr. Rogers with my children. I particularly liked the part where Mr. Rogers looked me right in the eye and told me that he likes me just the way I am. I know it's a little easier for Mr. Rogers to like me just the way I am because he doesn't have to live with me. It's a little more difficult for my wife, who does have to live with me. But I think there is something in most of us that yearns to hear and also feel this this message, a message that has

become lost in the endless commitment to progress and improvement that is such an integral part of western culture and western Christianity.

With regard to our scripture lesson this morning, I don't think it is about forgiveness. I think it is about love. I don't think Jesus forgave the woman; he accepted her as she was. She didn't have to become clean for him to love her. His love for her awakened a love within her, a love that was beginning to transform her, to help her change her life. Simon failed to see her as Jesus saw her. This is why Jesus asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

Do you see this life? This life is what it is. There is joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, success and failure, health and sickness. Would we really do away with all sorrow, all pain, all failure, all sickness? What kind of a life would we have? When we lose a loved one, it hurts; it *really* hurts. But would we want to live in a world where there is no death, no loss, no partings? In such a world, what would be the purpose of life, the purpose of living?

Do you see other people? Do we see them as God sees them? Do we see them as children of God? If we really see other people, even those who are different from us, even those whom we find annoying, who are not as we would like them to be, we will learn the secret of the way that Lao Tsu saw people, the way Jesus saw people. We will see them as incarnations of God. If God loves them as they are, perhaps we should also.

And finally, do you see yourself? Do you really see yourself? Do you see yourself as Jesus saw the woman? Do you see yourself as God sees you? If you can do this, you will become more accepting of yourself. Remember, you don't need to be perfect; you just need to become yourself fully and uniquely as a child of God.

If we can do this, we will be better able to help other people, people within our family, people within our church, people within our nation, people like the woman in our scripture lesson this morning become themselves fully as well. I think that this is what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus.

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