

JUST AS I AM? REALLY?!

(09/15/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 7:36-50

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

I received a lot of positive feedback from both Pilgrim Church and our church regarding my sermons this summer on interesting people in the Bible. I like positive feedback, but that’s not the point. The point is that people particularly liked my sermon on the elder brother of the prodigal son and my suggestion that God does not hold it against the prodigal son that he embarked upon a journey into life and made a mess of it. In fact, God would rather we embark upon the spiritual journey, the journey of individuation, than stay safely ensconced in our family of origin, the collective mores of our culture, and the dogmas of our religion.

Some of you were also interested in how this summer’s theme speaks to our relationship with God. In my sermons, if you recall, we entertained the possibility that God is not dissatisfied with us; in fact, God loves us as we are. As difficult as it may be to believe, God may not be dissatisfied with the world; God may love it just as it is. Because the world, the universe and everything in it, is God.

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 difficult or painful. It may not be our sacred duty to criticize life, to judge it, and to try to change it. It may not be our divinely appointed task to fix it. I’m not saying that our criticisms of life are not justified; in many cases they are, at least from a certain perspective. 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. If I were to go down this road, several people would immediately come to mind! I remember my first encounter with this strange way of thinking when, as an undergraduate philosophy major, I found myself struggling with the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s assertion that this may be the best of all possible worlds.

The best of all possible worlds? Really?? 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 our world and the people in 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 often unhappy with their life. They are basically 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. When reality differs from their ideal picture, 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 in the world and in people's lives may be grounded in caring, in compassion, in love. We would like the people on our prayer list to be healed, and we become angry or depressed when this doesn't happen. We want wars to cease—immediately, because they don't make any sense, and a lot of people are suffering tremendously. 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 (present parishioners, of course excluded!). More than a few of us would like to change our government on the state or the federal level or both.

When we project this change-centered or progress-centered dynamic onto God, assuming (of course) that God sees things the way we see them, and that God shares our feelings about the way things are, we assume that God is depressed and angry because human beings have not turned out the way God wanted. Not without just cause, we assume that human beings probably don't match God's picture of what we should be, and, though we have had thousands of years to work on it, it must annoy God that we have failed to create the kingdom of God on earth. We have terribly and tragically misused the precious gift of free will. We have worshipped idols, including ourselves. God has ample reason to be angry with us!

And yet, 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 that I was reading Spinoza, I also read Herman Hesse's novels *Journey to the East* and *Siddhartha*. These two books, which are still in my top ten favorites of all time, 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, and my beloved India is quickly becoming a hot mess. 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 complementary spiritual disciplines or paths. Each one gives us something, often a perspective that the others don't have. Each one provides an open-minded spiritual

seeker with another piece of the puzzle. I am interested not only in the unique perspective that each brings to bear on the spiritual journey, but also on what they have in common, for on the very deepest level I believe they draw from the same underground river.

When I immerse myself in a different culture, as our family did when we lived for a year in Germany thirty-eight 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. As much as I like book-learning, I believe a young person can learn a lot about life through travel.

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 old 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 \$300, you don't know how high. You might complain about our health care system (not without just cause), but the people in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) have it a lot worse. 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 Tzu, 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. In themselves, they are neither beautiful nor ugly, neither good nor bad. Lao Tzu calls us to eschew judgments that we might see and accept and love things just as they are.

Our economy, a capitalistic economy, is grounded in competition. We try to ensure that no one monopolizes a given field, thus preventing healthy competition. Lao Tzu, 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, at least the ancient East of which I speak, emphasizes cooperation rather than competition. When we don't compare or compete, we are at peace within ourselves. Then, and only then, can we 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. Nothing wrong with that! This is why my mother emigrated to this country from Canada and Darlene's family emigrated from Armenia. 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 Tzu 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, and also if this is how God looks at us: the way a good, a loving parent looks at his/her child.

Many of us who are parents criticize our children, purportedly in an attempt to make them better. We believe that it is our duty as parents to socialize our children, to help our children fit into the mainstream culture in a productive way. However, the way we look at our children, as "works in progress," may be hurtful to the child 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 Tzu would say that there is nothing wrong with our children; even if they are neurodiverse or born blind, they are perfect just as they are. Our children are not unfinished or unformed adults; they are children. Lao Tzu 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 are miserable, wretched sinners. We need to be

corrected, improved. We need to be redeemed, sanctified, and purified. Then and only then will God 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 nature, and what we do to nature we do to ourselves. 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 human beings 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 parental expectations. You need to try harder. 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 (yes, I still think he was both looking at and speaking directly to me), and he 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 that's not the point. The point is that I think there is something in most of us that yearns to hear and also feel 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 also, unfortunately, of western Christianity.

With regard to our scripture lesson his morning, just like with the Parable of the Prodigal Son, I don't think the ultimate lesson of the vignette is about forgiveness. I think it is about love! I don't think Jesus forgave the woman; he simply accepted her and loved her as she was. She didn't have to become clean, to become pure 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, on the other hand, failed to see the woman as Jesus saw her. This is why Jesus asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?" And Simon definitely doesn't! At least he doesn't see the woman the way Jesus sees the woman, the way we should see the woman.

Do we 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? It certainly wouldn't be to shape soul.

Do we 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 Tzu 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.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
September 15, 2024*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.