



SAINT LUKE'S

SEEING OURSELVES AS GOD SEES US

THE 6TH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

YEAR A

ECCLESASTICUS 15:15-20

1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9

MATTHEW 5:21-37

PSALM 119:1-8

A SERMON BY THE REV. POSEY KRAKOWSKY

FEBRUARY 12, 2017

As many of you know, I recently finished the fall semester of teaching at Union Theological Seminary. My class is called Art & Interfaith Dialogue, and I co-teach it with a colleague at the Metropolitan Museum. Every time we teach, the students are struck by how different our pedagogy is from other classes at the seminary. Our class is mostly experiential ~ and we begin by setting a meditative and collegial tone from the very first day. Because interfaith dialogue can be quite challenging, we ask the students themselves to come up with guidelines for how they want to engage with each other during the sessions. We also actively discourage the norm found in so many classrooms ~ that of zinger arguments where students seek to silence other students by “winning”. Our thought is that they will learn more from each other if they are *not* in competition, but instead, in an atmosphere where they can be truly willing to share. We let them know that first and foremost, they are accountable to each other as a community in the classroom space, not as individuals in competition to get the best grade.

The rewards of this approach are manifest in their final projects. Though many of them have never even *tried* to create art as adults, they all end up making and sharing their own works of art with each other. These highly revelatory and personal pieces speak to the trust established in the group. The students feel free to show each other *who they truly are*.

I encountered a similar approach to pedagogy a few days ago when I was reading a book about a *music* professor. The music world, and particularly the world of music in a conservatory, is especially fraught with a competitive ethos that can actually hinder the development of the students’ musicality.

This teacher combats that ethos by assuring each of the students that they will receive an A in the class. I know, at first blush, this may sound absurd, but listen to what else he does. When he makes this announcement, the professor also asks each student to write a letter to him, *in the past tense*, describing who the student *will be* after the year in the class (and why that student deserves an A). The professor writes:

“In this letter, the young performer focuses her gaze on the person she *wants* to be, momentarily silencing the voice in her head that tells her that she will fail. (...) The person that I teach each (week) is the person described in the letter.”¹

I thought of my own experiences with students and that of this teacher as I read the Gospel text from Matthew for today ~ the one in which, as my own seminary professor once said, “Jesus raises the bar really high.” Read one way, we can hear this long passage as the expectation that we must attain perfection in our lives ~ that we cannot even *think* bad thoughts because then God will judge us as having fallen short of this impossible standard and punish us.

But what if it is the opposite ~ what if, instead, this passage is calling us to open ourselves instead to the fullness of how *God sees us* ~ freed from the constraints that *we set upon ourselves*? What if Jesus is telling us that God sees possibilities of greatness within us that we cannot even imagine?

¹ Rosamund and Benjamin Zander - The Art of Possibility, page 29.

Looking at the text, we notice that Jesus is referencing some of the Ten Commandments from the Hebrew Bible. These commandments are often understood as the bare minimum of agreements required for a group of people to function as a society. All of them have to do with relationships – either God to human or human to human or both. What if, by raising the bar on that minimum, Jesus is asking us to shift our frame of reference away from the formal observance of rules just for the sake of being able to say we are “right”. What if he is asking us to listen to how God approaches *true righteousness: by loving one another as God loves us.*

What choice will we make? Will we blindly follow rules that actually limit us? Or will we instead decide to knowingly open our hearts to our best selves ~ the selves that God knows us to be? Will we choose to exclude and oppress our own selves and others based on technicalities? Or instead walk in trust and love ~ knowing that God’s Grace will vivify us to become what we truly are? Which way will we go? The way we’ve “heard it said we should”? Or the way God’s Grace would lead us?

One way of picturing God’s grace leading and infusing us – inviting us to be our best selves in relationship to others – is by imagining a parent holding a newborn child. Psychologists call the loving gazes between parent and child “mirroring.” Psychoanalyst and theologian Elizabeth Berne-DeGear writes: “(the mirroring of caregiver and baby) serves an important function in human development: in the mutual gaze, not only will a bond be forged between (caregiver) and baby, but the newborn will discover awareness of his or her own being. (...) In the psychological

development of the young human, mirroring and secure holding are crucial because utter dependence is the natural state the infant is born into. Only when this utter dependence is met by such responsive and trustworthy presence on the part of the (caregiving) other can the newborn human slowly grow into a healthy adult, to live out his or her innate potential.”²

The phrase *utter dependence* has resonance here – for we are indeed utterly dependent on God. It is in our trust – our faith that God alone can make a way out of no way – that we begin to rest in enlivening Grace. The standard Jesus sets is one that we are incapable of fulfilling without that Grace. And even then, we stumble. But unless we look to God to mirror us – to teach us what true relationship is – we will never transcend our own neediness.

In these times when our national discourse is so fraught – when factionalism and “being right” are the bywords of the day, we Christians are called to bear witness to the Gospel’s message of a different way of being, a way of justice and compassion. As Jesus tells us in the summary of the law: though shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. And though shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. That is how God calls us to be. That is who God *knows* us to be. And by God’s grace, that is whom we continue to become.

I will close with a poem from Emily Dickinson. She understood this message very well.

² Elizabeth Berne-DeGear – Gaze of Grace: Union Seminary Quarterly Review, Vol 65: 3&4, pages 10 & 16.

We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies—

The Heroism we recite
Would be a daily thing,
Did not ourselves the Cubits warp
For fear to be a King—

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