

“Making Room”

Matthew 5: 21-22; 43-47

Matthew 23: 13-22

Lynn Coye

July 24, 2016

Umstead Park UCC

Pie Jesu, today’s anthem, translates as Merciful Jesus. When we listen to today’s readings, though, we don’t exactly hear the sweet merciful Jesus we tend to think of. And while written in the same Gospel, they seem a little ... contradictory. Maybe. Maybe not ...

Some of Jesus’ harshest criticism in the New Testament is reserved for the Pharisees. You know them as the influential Jewish leaders who had many, many rules and were vying for political relevance among the people. At the time this was written, the writer of Matthew and Jesus’s followers were getting a lot of heat from the Pharisees. So we hear Jesus criticizing them for not recognizing God at work in the world and therefore being a roadblock to people who seek God. And then they convert other people to this wrong-headed philosophy, which means even more people can’t see God at work. Their focus on the minutiae of the law is preventing them from seeing what’s really at stake. He’s essentially saying that these Pharisees, who consider themselves keepers of the law and of God, are actually lawless and Godless. And he’s calling them out for their self-righteousness that blinds them to this truth.

Before we assume that the Pharisees were all bad, let’s consider a little of what THEY were coping with. The Pharisees had been working to preserve the Jewish tradition from Roman social, political, and religious influence. They sought to reinforce a religious philosophy of “law and order” so that they could hold onto sacred tradition. They were troubled by a number of liberal-minded reform movements, only ONE of which was Jesus and his followers. In their eyes, the Jewish community, which had survived so much, was being fractured. The Pharisees saw that their Jewish identity -- who they were and what they held sacred-- was in danger of being lost altogether.

Does this sound even a tiny bit familiar? On this Sunday poised between two political conventions?

Here’s the hard part. We’ve all heard these readings many times. And we have a natural tendency to see Jesus as right, Pharisees as all wrong. After all, we aren’t called a United Church of Pharisees congregation – we kinda picked a side a long time ago. But what if these words are meant for us, and not just those on the other side of the aisle? Is it possible that we are blinded at times by our own identity as open-minded Christians? Do we sometimes hate people we consider close-minded? The ones at the other convention? The ones in that Christian denomination who say we’re going to hell? The politicians who make laws that attack our identity and humanity?

Let me be clear that I am not suggesting that we should stop speaking up for what we believe in. We absolutely need to denounce and work to eliminate laws, policies, and every single practice that discriminates against and oppresses people. Injustice is never ok. Hatred is never ok. We were born for freedom. We were born for love. Our faith COMPELS us to settle for ABSOLUTELY NOTHING less.

What I’m talking about is the intent BEHIND our words and actions. There is a fine line between denouncing and demonizing. Can we make room for people we completely disagree with?

Here's my deep, dark confession: I am a self-admitted communications nerd. Some of you may know that corporate communications is what I do for a living. And so I'm always intrigued by how we can authentically communicate and influence others. 20 years ago I read a book titled "You Are the Message: Getting What You Want by Being Who You Are" --- written by Roger Ailes. Oh, wait, that's a different sermon. That IS an actual book of his and I DID read it way back then. But what I'm currently reading is, "I'm Right and You're an Idiot" -- that IS truly the title and it is NOT by Roger Ailes. It's by James Hoggan, who runs a Vancouver PR firm and is a long-time advocate on climate change issues. He chose the title to purposefully call out the state of toxic discourse we find ourselves in. In the book, he interviews a variety of other experts on advocacy, and they talk about something called the ADVOCACY TRAP -- the point at which we believe that people who disagree with us are wrongdoers. It happens over time; we don't start out that way. But when someone repeatedly criticizes our values, and calls us names, we get defensive and we start to think of them as an enemy. If you behave like an enemy, then I believe you to BE an enemy. When I first read that, I thought, well, YEAH. But then I let it sink in. We've moved from "they're wrong" to "they're wrongdoers" to "they're enemies." The problem is, he says, once we do that, it's nearly impossible to do anything over time other than pointlessly push each others' buttons. We are caught in what he calls the foe stance. Or, given today's readings, we might call it the "woe" stance. Woe to you -- you're hopeless, frauds, a brood of vipers. God can't possibly be working through them.

I'll admit that there have been times where, in the tradition of my mother, I have yelled at the TV and said, "You fear monger! Total narcissist!" And I pick apart the rhetoric until I've satisfied my need to reveal all their nonsense. Some of you might want to assure me that I'm not entirely wrong in what are clearly unbiased assessments, and I appreciate your support. But ... setting aside the spiritual aspect for a second. On a practical level, is this approach -- this reproach -- even the slightest bit helpful? If what I really want, deep down, is to persuade people who disagree with me to hear what I believe in? It's like I expect these folks to have an epiphany and say, "You know, you were SO RIGHT about me. THANK YOU because without your humiliation I might never have seen the error of my ways." And Hoggan says, this is the inherent risk of advocacy: "when you accuse someone of being stupid, or make them feel foolish or dim, it only serves to reinforce their default position--which is to activate their self-justification."

So where is that fine line between denouncing and demonizing? How do we avoid hating the haters? I think that the most important thing we can do is to keep asking those questions and not settle for easy conclusions. But since this IS a sermon, let me move right along to my version of answers ...

I'm a huge believer that the solution to most problems starts with self-awareness. I have to be aware of what I'm doing, thinking, saying, and listening to -- even if it's just in my head. Because words mean things. There's a tendency in society right now to discount political correctness. I DO think the term has outlived its usefulness. Because what I think we're ACTUALLY talking about is a commitment to decency and dignity through language. Our first reading today: Our words have the power to kill. How we think and treat another can either mend or tear the intangible fabric of humanity, whether we witness the results or not.

In his book, Hoggan also talks about being aware of naïve realism -- the built-in bias that we are NOT biased. "Naïve realism allows people on two sides of any issue, whether it's the Middle East or climate change, to each think their view is the only reasonable one." In one social experiment, "researchers gave a sample group of Palestinians a peace proposal designed by the Palestinians, but [they] labeled it as coming from the Israelis. [They] also gave Israelis a peace proposal that had come

from Israelis, but was labeled as a Palestinian proposal. Each side soundly rejected the proposals. They weren't rejecting the idea in the proposal; they were rejecting who they thought it came from."

So how do we become more aware of our own blind spots? One of the advocacy experts suggests the best way is to repeat the opposite camp's point of view. "We need to be able to hear the deniers' arguments if we are to be able to persuade them to hear ours. Listen openly, and see if you can understand the sources of people's fears and concerns. And then DON'T ask them to repeat their views—see if you can repeat theirs."

I also believe we have to ACTIVELY CHOOSE to understand alternative viewpoints. In this "age of information" we can tailor our online music stations to our likings, tailor our news to confirm our viewpoints, tailor our circle of friends to those who agree with us ... we run the risk of becoming very insulated in this "age of information." We need to make room in our news feed, our circle of friends, and our lives for perspectives different from our own. In 2008, Jonathan Haidt gave a TED talk called "The Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives." Haidt who's a professor of ethical leadership at NYU's Stern School of Business, explains how tribal thinking – our tendency to create our own teams of like-minded people – can blind us to open-minded thinking. It's what can lead any one of us, on either side, to believe what we wanna believe, despite the mounting evidence of facts to the contrary. He says, "Our righteous minds have been designed by evolution to unite us into teams and divide us against other teams, to blind us to the truth." He explains how Liberals seek diversity, new experiences, novelty, question authority and speak for the weak and oppressed – even at the risk of chaos. Conservatives, in general, speak for "law and order." They crave things that are familiar, safe and dependable, predictable – even if that means some folks might not enjoy all the freedoms that others do. They support institutions and ... TRADITION. Sounds a bit like Jesus and the Pharisees, right?

The part I most love about this TED Talk is where Haidt explains that in the Hindu faith, both Vishnu – the preserver and protector – and Shiva – the destroyer and bringer of change – share the same body. It's the age-old Asian philosophy about the interdependence of opposites, the Yin and Yang. If we can make room for the possibility that each has value and that TOGETHER they create balance ... I think we're on the path to making a difference.

And now I'm going to make a really radical suggestion. We can start with prayer. Not prayer that others will change their minds. Not even a prayer for unity. We can pray that we might see our blind spots and that OUR hearts will be changed. And if we're not yet ready to pray for our own change, then we pray for the WILLINGNESS to be changed. Or even the willingness for the willingness. So that we can make room at the table for even those we can't stand.

So let me close with this. In the heart of Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah, there's a different story about how God brought the world into existence. It's not the two stories in Genesis that we're used to. But I find it equally -- if not more -- poetic. Isaac Luria was a kabbalist in the mid-16th century who wondered: If Ein Sof – the Infinite God – was indeed infinite and pervaded everything, how was there even room for anything OTHER than God to come into being? What Luria taught was that the first divine act was not creation, but withdrawal. Ein Sof withdrew into itself to create a vacuum. In some versions of Luria's teaching, this withdrawal was seen as cathartic: to make room for the elimination of harsh judgment from Ein Sof. God made room for the world to come into being, so that we might make room for God in the world. And may it always be so.

-Lynn Coye