

“Unraveled: Unraveling of Dualistic Worldviews”

Luke 19:1-10

A couple of weeks ago, the Batavian published a picture and a short story of the rainbow sign that is in front of our church which states, “God Loves Everyone, No Exceptions.” It was a touching story but in one of the Facebook comments, one person wrote, “even a pedophile?” That is often the challenge I get when we preach God’s unconditional love. People want to draw some limits. We are taught to divide the world in dualistic ways: good versus evil, wrong versus right, and friends and strangers/enemies. We would like to think of ourselves as the good guys while others who wrong us or the people we respect and love, are often labeled as the bad guys. It seems to keep the world good, safe, and predictable for us. Writer and teacher of nonviolent communication Marshall Rosenberg writes, “For thousands of years, we’ve been operating under this system that says that people who do bad deeds are evil — indeed, that human beings are basically evil. According to this way of thinking, a few good people have evolved, and it’s up to them to be the authorities and control the others. And the way you control people, given that our nature is evil and selfish, is through a system of justice in which people who behave in a good manner get rewarded, while those who are evil are made to suffer. In order to see such a system as fair, one has to believe that both sides deserve what they get.” That is how we can justify violence against others. Rosenberg quotes Walter Wink saying, “Theologian Walter Wink estimates that violence has been the social norm for about eight thousand years. That’s when a myth evolved that the world was created by a heroic, virtuous male god who defeated an evil female goddess. From that point on, we’ve had the image of the good guys killing the bad guys. And that has evolved into “retributive justice,” which says that there are those who deserve to be punished and those who deserve to be rewarded. That belief has penetrated deep into our societies. Not every culture has been exposed to it, but, unfortunately, most have.”

But let’s be honest with ourselves. How has this model of seeing the world worked out for us? Where do we see it not working? It may seem to keep us safe, but in reality, it has caused us a lot of pain. It has produced a mentality of all-or-nothing. We can’t be happy until things go our way 100%. We can’t look at people as complex and as capable of growth and transformation. One of the clearest examples of such mentality is our politics. We label those on the other side as bad and evil. We can’t even begin to understand their worldview.

So how do we find our way out of this entangled mess? Jesus gives us an example of reaching out in love and care to bring healing to the community from that kind of worldview. In our story for this week, we hear about Jesus going to Jericho and there he notices a man that was labeled by society as the bad guy. The story of Zacchaeus is only found in the Gospel of Luke. The story just before this one (chapter 18) is about the rich young ruler who had all the right theology and words about God but had no ability to live his faith. Because of his wealth, he was unable to make the choice to follow the way of Jesus. But here in this story we are presented with another rich man who is generous and is able to reverse the oppressive trends of his profession and of his time. The story of

Zacchaeus turns our expectations and prejudices upside down and it all hinges on Jesus' example of seeing the beautiful humanity of Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Tax collectors were seen as collaborators with the Roman Empire and its occupation of the land and its people. They not only collected the tax which the Roman government required, but they also added to the bill to get themselves a piece of the pie. In a way, they were legal crooks. As a result, Zacchaeus was rich and his wealth came as a result of exploiting others. His description as a short man might be seen as a metaphor for his diminished spirit.

Jesus could have just overlooked this man. He could have treated him like everyone else did. But that is not what Jesus did in such situations. Everyone was a potential member of the kingdom of God. Everyone was seen by Jesus as deserving of compassion and the opportunity to grow and transform. In our worldview of good guys versus bad guys, we would expect the story to end in a typical fashion, where the rich man/the villain is revealed as the bad guy. Instead, we are shocked to learn that Zacchaeus actually becomes a good guy. His greed unravels into radical generosity. His whole vocation and identity changes so dramatically because of one person hearing him and seeing him as worthy. Jesus was not driven by a dualistic mindset. He was driven by a higher wisdom that saw the presence of God in all of life, even (or maybe especially) the broken parts of creation.

I want to invite you today to focus on the example of Jesus of transcending the mentality of winners and losers, of good guys versus bad guys to see the potential in every human being. If we want to work on complex issues like pandemics and racism in our country, we have to follow the example of Jesus of creating spaces where we engage each other in ways that transcend the simplistic models of good versus evil.

Here are a couple of examples for us. One is from Marshall Rosenberg's work on nonviolent communication as a language of life. There are four steps to it: Observing without judgment what is happening in a given situation; identifying what one is feeling; identifying what one is needing; and then making a request for what one would like to see occur.

Here is a piece about Rosenberg's model from an article in the Sun magazine. Rosenberg learned about violence at an early age. Growing up in Detroit in the thirties and forties, he was beaten up for being a Jew and witnessed some of the city's worst race riots, which resulted in more than forty deaths in a matter of days. These experiences drove him to study psychology in an attempt to understand, as he puts it, "what happens to disconnect us from our compassionate nature, and what allows some people to stay connected to their compassionate nature under even the most trying circumstances."

On one occasion in the late 1980s, he was asked to teach his method to Palestinian refugees in Bethlehem. He met with about 170 Muslim men at a mosque in the Deheisha Camp. On the way into the camp, he saw several empty tear-gas canisters along the road, each clearly marked "Made in U.S.A." When the men realized their would-be

instructor was from the United States, they became angry. Some jumped to their feet and began shouting, "Assassin! Murderer!" One man confronted Rosenberg, screaming in his face, "Child killer!"

Although tempted to make a quick exit, Rosenberg instead focused his questions on what the man was feeling, and a dialogue ensued. By the end of the day, the man who had called Rosenberg a murderer had invited him home to Ramadan dinner.

That is the power of this model of nonviolent communication. It leads us beyond our predictable labels, camps, and ideologies that separate and hurt us and others. It is a practical way to restore our sense of connection to others.

Another example comes from a man by the name of Emmanuel Acho who recently started a show called, "Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man" with the idea of engaging people in conversations that will ultimately lead to healing racism in our country. Even though the issue is systemic, the solutions have to be relational. We have to talk to each other, especially people of different colors to help build a bridge into a different future where we see our connections and value them in new ways. We have to help each other beyond the dualistic divisions we create of good versus evil. So the next time, you are tempted to vilify someone or some group, practice this short prayer: God help me to see this person or situation, not as good (right hand) or evil (left hand), but through your heart (hands over heart). Amen.