

“Dare to Care: Attitude Toward Others”
Luke 6:37-42

In 2003 right after the United States announced that it would invade Iraq, I preached a sermon in the previous church where I served lamenting the decision and praying for peace. I raised the question about the futility of violence in our world and the call of Jesus to a nonviolent transformation of evil. This was not a popular time to question war because the pain and fear of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 were still very fresh in our minds. Many in our country wanted to believe that the invasion was justified. And so the following day after the sermon, a member of the church told me that I should not be the one preaching on such a topic. There were two other pastors at the church, and she believed that they were the ones with the credibility to tackle such an issue. When I pressed her to tell me why the other two were okay to talk about war while I was not, she finally said, “Because you are an Arab!” I had a hard time believing my ears. How could anyone judge me this way? Being an Arab American had very little to do with my convictions about war. My faith in Jesus Christ was the motivator. The woman could not have been more wrong about me and my motivations. But that is the way prejudice or negatively judging others works.

Our attitude toward others could open or close us to compassion. How we choose to see others has a tremendous impact on us and all of our relationships. From an early age we learn to judge others negatively. Our insecurities, fears, lack of knowledge, and need to control often lead us to focus on what is negative in others to the point of forgetting that they are created in the image of God. If you don't believe this, think right now of a political or a public figure you despise and try to imagine them for one second being created in the image of God!!!

Here is a touching video about being too quick in our negative judgments of others:
https://youtu.be/Fzn_AKN67oI

Jesus knew about our human tendencies and dedicated a great deal of his ministry to help people learn to connect with compassion instead of judgment. Our reading today is from the famous sermon in which he gave many radical teachings that challenged the dominant culture of his time and which continue to challenge us today. In the Gospel of Matthew, we know this as the Sermon on the Mount, but in Luke, the location is a plain. A modern-day equivalent to what Jesus did is a TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) talk. According to their website “TED is a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less).”

The idea is that such talks could change the culture and thus change the world. Jesus certainly believed this and so did the Gospel writers who recorded his teachings to spread them to as many people as possible. As we look at compassion today, Jesus' teachings are just as relevant today as they were 2000 years ago. (Read Luke 6:37-42)

Jesus' teachings about refraining from judging others can be life changing for all of us. If we take these teachings seriously, the world would be turned upside down. The Christian faith spread in the early centuries because of its zeal for compassion. It was not the

buildings, the sermons, the doctrines, the powers, or wealth that the followers of Jesus had that transformed people's lives. It was instead the very simple and yet courageous acts of compassion which the followers of Jesus practiced day in and day out. Christians were inclusive in their communities of all people. Faith was not a special club to join but an invitation to embrace others in love, especially those who are mistreated or excluded.

I love the short parable which Jesus gives about judgment. He said, "can a blind person guide a blind person?" Blindness is at the heart of many of our human struggles. We see only through our vantage point and that is why it is dangerous for us to judge others without opening our eyes to the larger picture of their lives. Jesus was not saying that we should not judge at all because we must discern good things from bad things. What he was addressing is our blindness to the struggles and the humanity of others. It is also about our blindness to the loving example of God. This blindness often leads us to stereotype, gossip, pigeon-hole, and stigmatize others. And the worst part of this is that we are often unaware of our own blind spots. We don't know what we don't know. William Allen writes this about the word "judge" in our Bible reading for this week, "'To judge' can mean to form an opinion as to whether a person is in accord with Christian principles. Alternatively, 'to judge' can carry the juridical sense of passing sentence on the guilty, as a court-room judge condemns criminals to prison terms. In verse 37, Luke uses 'judge not' in the second sense, making this clear by his use of the parallel, 'do not condemn,' and its opposite, 'forgive.' In each case, guilt is assumed, because forgiveness is unneeded where no sin exists. In other words, Jesus does not forbid forming an opinion regarding other's faults; indeed, he assumes the validity of so doing in verses 34 and 41-45. He does, however, prohibit condemnation on the basis of such discernment."

This past week I watched the movie "The Promise" (screen -picture of the movie) about the Armenian Genocide in Turkey, during World War I. My maternal grandfather was Armenian. He was among the lucky people who were able to escape the genocide by running away to Syria. There were over one and half million people killed because of the fear and prejudice that was promoted by the government against Armenians and the weapons to kill the people were supplied by the Germans who were sowing seeds of hate and fear in that region. I was reminded of how important it is for us as human beings to be intentional in growing our compassion and in not allowing negative judgments of others to grow in our lives.

So how do we overcome and transform prejudice and negative judgment? In her book *Boundless Compassion*, Joyce Rupp writes this (screen), "We are capable of changing what we think and how we respond. The more intentionally we concentrate on being nonjudgmental, nonviolent, and forgiving, the stronger our possibility of being able to respond that way becomes. For instance, if I am having difficulty in trying to be less judgmental about someone, I can reduce that negativity by consciously intending to notice my thoughts about that person, and then choosing to alter them if they are not kind. As I do so repeatedly, the neurons in that area of my brain gain strength in their ability to be less judgmental. Awareness of my thoughts increases, and I am more conscious of where I let those thoughts lead me."

Rupp then goes on to tell about her growing up years and how she learned to be judgmental. The adults in her life modeled (screen) “the scissors method.” She wrote that in her family, “instead of entering into dialogue when conflicts arose, they simply cut off the lines of communication by their silence, or by completely ending the relationship. Snip. Snip. Snip. No more connection. So, of course, this is what I did until young adulthood when I realized this approach strongly opposes what Jesus taught.” Rupp concludes that (screen), “We plant the seeds of compassion by being aware of our thoughts and feelings, and by the deliberate intention to think and respond in kindhearted manner.”

This week, I invite you to take one day to pay attention to your thoughts and your tendencies to judge others negatively. Every time you become aware of such thoughts, take a deep breath and release the thought on your exhale. Take another day to fast from judging others releasing all the negative energy you spend on such judgments. Start this day with an intention of seeing the good in everyone you encounter, even if the good you will notice is just that they are alive.

We will spend a few moments in prayer together to practice this letting go of negative judgment. This is taken from Rupp’s book. “Call to mind someone whom you judge disapprovingly, or someone whom you wish to change in order to meet your criteria. Imagine you are standing behind that person’s back, looking out through his or her eyes. Ask yourself where this person might be hurting....”

Prayer by Rupp: “Merciful One, you look into the heart and see what we mortals cannot see. Pull us away from making disparaging judgments. Move us toward greater compassion for those whose appearance and behavior differ from ours.” Amen.