

Grace Episcopal Church

The Rev. Ann P. Wood

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9)

July 5, 2009

Ezekiel 2:1-5; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

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In the words of today's Psalmist, let us pray:

“Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.

Too much of the scorn of the indolent rich,
and of the derision of the proud.” AMEN

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“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.”

Judgment! Judgment and prejudice! I won't ask for a show of hands, but I wonder how many of us have ever judged someone based on his or her family background, appearance, or occupation? How many of us, I wonder, have formed and stated a negative opinion about someone without knowing that person really well? We sometimes dismiss people with comments like:

Oh yes, I think I know Archie – isn't he that really weird kid with rings in his eyebrows and tongue?

Or Jack? – he can't be very smart – he works at the town dump!

Or - how about Maisie – she won't amount to anything coming from that family of losers – her dad's an alcoholic and her mom's a drug addict. What d'you expect? Then I also wonder how many of us remember the pain and humiliation of judgments that may have been made against us. I wonder how they might have affected our lives and who we are today. Were we changed by the label that was put on us? What did we do to compensate for the pain? I will tell you in a moment about one person's experience, but first let's look at the Gospel reading.

Jesus was a carpenter – like his earthly father before him – working with his hands – a skilled, manual job – and the people of Nazareth greeted him on his return home with disdain. They knew his family well – his mother, brothers and sisters – but “they took offense at him”. He came home in his new role as a Rabbi, bringing his disciples with him – an itinerant preacher with his band of followers. On the Sabbath, he did what any religious teacher did - he taught in the synagogue and healed a few of the sick. The people were amazed, however, that such wisdom and healing could come from one of their own – an ordinary, working man, a mere carpenter – and they were annoyed that he could be so presumptuous as to teach in their synagogue and presume to heal the sick. They were unwilling to believe in his wisdom and power. It seems that there are no severer critics than those who have known us and our family since childhood.

I wonder what opportunities the people of Nazareth lost. They had the opportunity for physical, emotional and spiritual healing; the opportunity to have their individual, familial and community lives transformed and changed forever. They chose not only to reject the healing, but to threaten the life of the One who offered it. How many opportunities do we miss in our own lives because we make snap judgments about ourselves and others, or allow “familiarity to breed contempt”? D’you suppose that a year or two down the road, the Nazarenes might have remembered and hungered for Jesus’ teachings? They judged him on the external evidence, unwilling to discover who he’d become during his absence or to consider who he was when he was with them – unwilling to acknowledge his true nature, his true depths, his full gifts or his relationship to his heavenly Father.

Jesus didn't hide his true self. He didn't wear a mask like most of us do, to protect himself or to hide his deficiencies – he didn't have any. I wonder what his human and his divine reactions were to his neighbors' rejection of his gifts and his love. The very people who knew him so well, who you might imagine would welcome him back home and listen to him, "took offense at him." Because the atmosphere was one of hostility, Jesus' words fell on deaf ears.

What did Jesus do about his reception? He stayed true to himself, although he WAS amazed at their lack of faith. He healed the few who came to him and were willing to be healed. Their faith was honored – but I wonder if that came with a cost – after all they were going against the tide by coming forward. Were they black-listed for their actions? We don't know. Unfortunately, many of us, especially those new to the faith, find it more difficult to share God's love and word with those who know us well, than we do with strangers.

We mortals often find experiences similar to the one Jesus encountered in Nazareth to be so painful, that we withdraw from others or we put on a mask to hide who we really are. We become someone we're not, in order to be loved and accepted. We fear exposure of our perceived inadequacies and so we hide. We learn to believe the lies that we've been told as children – such typical remarks as:

-use your brain – if you've got one!

-it's a pity you're not more like your brother – he's so well-behaved;

or – you'll never be any good at math or science – girls never are;

So the list goes on, and I'm sure you could add some of your own.

The more we hear such lies, the more we accept them as truths. The more we build our defenses to hide our vulnerabilities - the pain and false shame of our unworthiness - the more difficult it becomes for us to know who we really are and the more difficult it becomes for others to know the real person within us.

We live in a shame-based society – constantly bombarded by evidence of how imperfect we are, where we should live or go to school, or what we need to buy in order to become more acceptable:-

- the new sports car, for instance, that projects a “macho” image – one of daring and youthfulness;
- the hair coloring that will cover up the gray or the botox treatment that will maybe make one look young again,
- or the grill that cooks everything to perfection – a “must” for the successful host or hostess.

What hard work it is trying to be someone we’re really not and how much we lose. What gifts lie undiscovered or unshared, because we restrict ourselves by the limitations we place and the walls that we build to prevent others from knowing us as we really are.

How can we change the self-protective defensiveness that builds barriers between us and others? This was the experience of a friend of mine, who I will call Shirley. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, her father would tell her: “you’ll never ever be any good – and you might as well get used to the idea. You’re not smart like your sisters and you never will be”. As an adult, she believed his statements as truth. She really is quite intelligent, but she never did particularly well in school, never gave going to college a second thought, and eventually got a job right out of high school as a typist in

a small company. Fortunately for Shirley, two things happened. First, her boss recognized her potential abilities and encouraged her. His acknowledgment of her actual abilities led Shirley to question the lies her father had pounded into her psyche. Secondly, as Shirley grew into her Christian faith, she read in Psalm 139 that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made”. She wondered if that could possibly mean that SHE was wonderfully made. She eventually became a very successful personal assistant to the CEO of her company, although, even today, at the age of 75, she still struggles periodically with issues relating to self worth.

So, first, Shirley was able to recognize that she had a problem. She identified her problem – the lie she’d believed - and also its origin, her father. She then learned that there’s no hiding from God. God sees us as we really are – warts and all – and loves us just the same. His love is unconditional! Isn’t that wonderful? His love for each one of us is unconditional!

Today we hear the lies that crush us, from parents, peers and educators. This pattern goes back to the original lies in the creation story. The evil one deceived Adam and Eve into thinking they were not good enough even though “God saw everything he had made and indeed it was very good”. Adam and Eve were deceived into mistrusting God, even as He was demonstrating His willingness to provide all that they needed. Believing lies has been going on since time immemorial. We need, rather, to believe that Carpenter who showed up in Nazareth. We ARE fearfully and wonderfully made. He CAN heal us from the effects of the lies told to us by the evil ones. He CAN make us free from the fear and defensiveness that permeates our soul when we believe we are unworthy of love. Our beliefs and opinions of ourselves need, instead, to match with

God's appraisal of us. We are, after all, made in God's image with spiritual attributes. We have it all wrong if we seek this world's appraisal and approval, rather than God's. Therefore our beliefs and opinions about ourselves and our neighbors, need to be in sync with God's – and then what freedom that realization and acceptance creates – both for ourselves and for others.

Last week, Margaret spoke about the two healings we heard related in Mark's Gospel – the woman with the hemorrhage and Jairus' daughter – both included healing of emotions and faith, along with physical restoration – both of them miraculous. The good news is that those kinds of healings can also occur today. After his death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to be with us, that we might have the same kind of relationship with God that Jesus himself had – free from any worry about his image – safe, secure, covered and protected by God's love. That same Holy Spirit can work through each one of us as he chooses today. As Paul reminds us in chapter 12 of his 1st letter to the Corinthians: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” – and one of those manifestations is the gift of healing. God can use each one of us as His vessels – as conduits for His healing power.

Jesus, in dying on the cross, paid for our shame. We can therefore go to him in prayer, asking others to pray with and for us. We can claim our free gift, including healing from the shame and a lifting of the burden we've been carrying. In our prayer, we can acknowledge our inadequacies and our strengths before God, and ask for the capacity to forgive the perpetrator of the lie. We can ask for the capacity to forgive ourselves for any self-rejection – for hiding behind our masks, for not being the person God created us to be – and repent of our response to the injury we received. We can pray

for the insight to know who God really means us to be and with that revelation comes more freedom and healing. Somehow, we're afraid to trust God, especially when it comes to His power to heal, and especially from experiences like trauma, from addictions or even from physical dis-ease. God can and does heal. God has plans for us that are bigger than anything we can imagine. Jeremiah, in his letter to the exiles in Babylon writes: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope". The more we come to know God, the more we can learn to trust God and trust that God's voice is bigger than that of mortals.

As we become healed and thus freed from our baggage of pain and shame, our masks fall off. We no longer feel the need to protect ourselves from the judgments of others, nor do we feel the need to judge others superficially. We are free to explore who we really are, to discover our God-given gifts and talents, without the fear of being judged or ridiculed, since we are seeking only God's approval. It becomes easier to forgive ourselves, as well as the perpetrator of the untruths we've believed. It becomes easier not to let rejection or prejudice prevent us from speaking or hearing the word of God – even if it initially falls on deaf ears. It becomes easier to relate to others, to love others for who they are, and not to judge them by their external appearances. We can become able to grant each and everyone the freedom to be the unique child of God that God created us to be.

AMEN