

“Judgment at Middleburg”

When I was in France I spent lots of time walking the boulevards. The French have a name for one who does this—*flâneur*. It literally means a "stroller", "lounger", or "saunterer." A synonym is a *boulevardier*. A prime example from the movies would be Maurice Chevalier in “Gigi.” Of course, I am no Chevalier in top hat, morning coat and spats, but Paris seems to invite one to *flânerie*. There is really nothing like strolling down the broad avenues looking in shop windows, stopping for a pastry or coffee, sitting in a park watching other people stroll, or more actively dodging the traffic in narrow streets of the old neighborhoods. It may seem to be an idle diversion but it is fascinating and stimulating.

Of course, one of the great aspects of *flânerie* is people watching. I think I am not alone in enjoying this pastime. Observing the children sailing their boats on the lake, couples canoodling on a park bench or older folks playing *pétanque* can be fun. But if it gets critical particularly of the people it loses its innocence and becomes judgmental.

It seems to me that judging others is actually something people like to do. Looking at today’s passage from Genesis we hear the end of a story where everyone was judging someone at one point or another and most of their judgements were ill conceived. The back story to this scene is that Joseph is the youngest of the sons of Jacob. He is also Jacob’s favorite which his brothers resent. Additionally, he is annoying. In his dreams his brothers and even his father bow down to him in respect.

When all of the brothers are far from home tending the flocks Jacob sends Joseph to check on them. As he approaches the brothers decide to throw him in a pit so that he might starve, drown, or be killed by wild beasts. Having done this they relent from leaving him to die and sell him into slavery. In Egypt after some trials and tribulations Joseph proves himself a wise man and pharaoh puts him in charge of the country.

The famine Joseph predicts also affects Canaan and his brothers come to Egypt to buy grain. They encounter Joseph and do not recognize him, but he recognizes them. After some back and forth he finally reveals his identity. They fear for their lives for they expect revenge for how they mistreated him. However he does not sit in judgment on his brothers, instead forgives them. Lord knows he had every right to come down hard on them, but Joseph knew that revenge would only extend the cycle of injury. He decided it was better to break that cycle for all involved.

In this passage from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that it is best not to get in the cycle to begin with. Instead of battling our enemies we should love them. It is counter intuitive, radical, and downright hard to put into action. But Jesus came to teach us a new way. It is a way that we are still trying to comprehend and live into. He says to us that instead of looking at the other as a potential threat or enemy we should look at the other with compassion, caring and love.

Loving, feeding, and clothing our enemies can make us vulnerable to seeing them as something other than the enemy. Withholding judgment, even of the most benign sort, opens us up to walking in their shoes. Turning the other cheek gives the offender the opportunity to repent as he witnesses our humility. Allowing the bully to exhaust his anger is better than escalating the situation by fighting back.

Mahatma Gandhi brought freedom to India not through a violent insurrection but through passive resistance. He said he would not fight the British Empire but he would resist it. Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr. traveled to India to learn from Gandhi. The Civil Rights movement used those same tactics to break the strangle hold that white supremacists had on the south. When people across the country saw photos and television footage of policeman on horses wielding batons against peaceful marchers, dogs attacking nonviolent protesters, and firehoses being turned on defenseless people they were horrified. Passive resistance was strong. Violence proved weak.

Rabbi Hillel, who was a contemporary of Jesus, said “Do not do to others what is hateful to you.” Jesus turned it from a prohibition into an action. He said “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” He urges us to actively love people who hate us. He commands us to feed and clothe people we see as enemies.

As we often say at the offertory, “Walk in love and Christ loved us.” If Jesus walked in love and loved us we are called to do the same. Jesus also walked in love for the person we hate. We might think that Jesus was crazy to love that person, but others may think that Jesus was crazy to love you and me. That is a judgement which is not ours to make.

The world needs less judgement and fear. It needs more kindness, compassion and love. The essence of Jesus’ ministry is to love God and love each other. When we do that everything else starts to fall into place.