

“Who’s to Judge?”

I love people watching. I can see some heads nodding out there. It seems some of you might like doing the same. At its most innocent it is just noticing faces, distinctive walks, and stylish clothing. There are also times when I look at people and make up stories about who they are or what they are doing. The person who is scowling might be angry with his boss. The woman talking dreamily on her phone I can imagine is talking to someone she loves. The little boy being dragged along by mom who is so eager to stop and spend time petting the dog or investigating some yummy looking food dropped by another pedestrian. If my mood is nonchalant or I am feeling generous to the world that is the extent of it.

However, if I am the one who is angry with my boss, has been hurt by another, or is in a dark mood the people watching can become mean spirited. The man who is angry becomes someone who is mean and controlling. The dreamy woman is actually stringing along someone for her own enjoyment, and the little boy is a brat who torments his longsuffering mother.

I can also become the fashion police ridiculing in my thoughts, people who have not made good clothing choices that morning; whether they are mismatched, not age appropriate, or apparently intentionally unbecoming. Hair styles, makeup, jewelry, shoes, and more are not immune from my spiteful judgments.

One might say that this people watching, even at its most cruel is harmless. It is not as if I am getting in someone face to tell them that they need to see a stylist or should immediately apply for a fashion makeover on “What Not to Wear” or “Say Yes to the Dress.” I’m just having a little internal fun at the expense of someone who does not know any better. At least that is what I can tell myself.

On the other hand, my spiteful judgmentalism can change me. The moment I think that I have the power to judge another person even for the most trivial of things I open the floodgates to judging in a variety of ways without even being aware that I have slid down that slippery slope. I also can become somewhat paranoid of being judged by others. After all, if I am doing it then others must be doing it also. Perhaps they are making fun of my weight or my clothing choices. I worry that my hair is inappropriate or my clothes are ill-fitting or age inappropriate. This can lead to my being fearfully looking for a hiding place or more preemptive judging on my part. Judging is not innocent. In fact, it is infectious like a virus.

Judging like so many of our behaviors probably has its birth somewhere in our collective ancient past. Being able to judge a stranger as a threat or a friend was a good thing to be able to do when life was riskier on the savannah of Africa. Lions and tigers and bears are easy, but what about that human coming toward me. Is his intent benign or dangerous? Do I need to run, prepare to fight, or put down my weapon in order to greet him? It is important to be able to make that distinction if one wants to survive.

Jesus was as aware of this natural inclination; Jesus came to teach us a new way. It is a way that we are still trying to comprehend and live out. Jesus’ way is quite radical. He says to us that instead of looking at the other as a potential threat or enemy we should look at the other with love. The other is not an enemy, a threat, a scourge, a liar, a cheat, or a trickster. The other is just another human being. Because

the other was also created by God and like all of God's creation has the breath of God inside of him or her they should be treated as one of God's beloved children.

The world says that is all well and good, but really it is quite rosy and perhaps naïve. It is the stuff of children's stories, fairy tales, and the Hallmark Channel. Anyone who lives like that will quickly pay the price for their foolishness either in bodily or mental hurt or out of the pocketbook. They will regret it.

A few years ago I was teaching a class that had us reading the Bible from beginning to end in the course of 35 weeks. When we got to this passage the women and men in the group pushed back and pushed back hard. They told stories of being accosted for money outside convenience stores, being mugged, and encountering homeless people begging money on the street. They expressed either fear or disdain for those they encountered in these situations. We agreed that these were genuine feelings and perhaps quite warranted at times. But I insisted that if we are going to abide by Jesus' easy teachings we better look hard at the difficult ones as well.

The following week two class members who were both well-off middle-aged lawyers had something to report to the group. Both of these men had been adamant the previous week that Jesus's teaching was not reasonable. Their minds were made up. However, in the intervening week they had both decided, independent of the other, to try out Jesus' teaching. Each had decided to give money to a beggar on the street. The one I remember most clearly said he stopped to give money to this homeless man he passed every day. He opened his wallet intending to give a dollar or two and found that the smallest bill he had was a twenty. He hesitated for a moment, but went ahead and gave the fellow a twenty-dollar bill. As he moved on the man called out to him. "Do you know you gave me a twenty?" He stopped and turned around, responding that, "Yes, he was aware." The homeless man said, "Thank you, sir. No one has ever given me \$20 before. I mostly get spare change. Thank you for your generosity. God bless you." He felt good about what he had done. He felt good that he had not continued to walk past the homeless man. He felt that he had taken the challenge and the result was unexpectedly positive.

They did not immediately feel so changed that they immediately became pro bono advocates for the poor. Nor did they quit their high-paying jobs to volunteer in soup kitchens or move to Mumbai to work with the The Missionaries of Charity. But they were changed in a very wonderful way.

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 they witness our humility.

Jesus pushes us, he goads us, and he challenges us to live life differently. He teaches us to move beyond our instincts to a place of love. It is not easy. Take the little steps. Give a dollar to the one who asks not worrying how it will be spent. Express concern for someone who often hurts you. Walk in love instead of fear and loathing. Bless each person who comes your way. At first it may feel too vulnerable or unsafe. Allow yourself to move through that and beyond it to a place where compassion is your stance. Jesus asks it. The world needs it. You need it too.