

Disciples Don't Judge

Part 8 of Sermon Series:

What Disciples Do

a sermon based on

Luke 18:9-14

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As many of you know or have heard, I try to get away for a backpacking trip once a year – just me, the dog... and Smith & Wesson. (I sleep better when they join me in the tent, especially in areas inhabited by large predators) Of course that's always a last resort. It's just that deploying bear spray inside a tent isn't the wisest course of action. So whenever I hear news about a bear attack or threat, I pay attention. What did they do? How did they handle it? Did it work? One story I remember involved Steve Luggard and J.B. Quick.

They were out on a day hike when they spotted a bear... AND the bear spotted them. As Steve tells it, he went into an immediate panic because he realized that he'd forgotten to bring bear spray. Then when he saw J.B. take off his backpack, he was relieved that he'd remembered his. That is until J.B. pulled out a pair of running shoes and started to take off his hiking boots.

"What are you doing? If he charges, there's no way you'll outrun that bear."

J.B. looked at him with all seriousness and said, "I don't have to outrun the bear. I only have to outrun you."

Okay, that's an old one. Some of you knew the punchline before I got there. I made up the names. The "J" in J.B. Quick stands for Jack. Use a first initial for Steve Luggard. It's a silly little addition that I couldn't resist. You may wonder what this has to do with either of the Scripture passages that we've heard, today.

So, let's look at the Gospel lesson. Jesus tells a parable about a self-righteous Pharisee and a self-abasing tax collector. The gist of the story is that the humble and remorseful man received the mercy that he asked for; but the prideful man celebrating his moral superiority would be humbled. We get that. Right? So how does that connect with a joke about a bear and running shoes?

Do you notice something about the arrogant man? He brags about fasting twice a week and tithing (spiritual disciplines that were at the core of Christian tradition including Methodism) taking credit for his (we'll call it) "righteousness." This guy's a Pharisee. He knows what Scripture says. He's read Isaiah 58:1-8:

¹Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

²Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.

³"Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. (NRSV)

He's heard Micah 6:6-8:

⁶“With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (NRSV)

This Pharisee – this righteous man – how did he compare with others who fasted and tithed? The things that he bragged about? Earlier in Luke – Luke 11:42 to be exact, we hear Jesus say this, “But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.” He didn’t brag about those things.

Even still – he only brags – after proclaiming thanks that he’s not as bad as “those” people – people like that tax collector beating his chest.

It’s a common theme. It’s a theme that we hear in Scripture and in our daily lives – the notion that we can be good enough, and that we can know we are good enough by judging how much better we are than others. It’s like we think that God grades on a bell curve. We don’t have to be perfect – we don’t have to be able to outrun all sin – I just have to outrun you.

That’s what happens when we judge others. When we point out how others have failed and sinned and fall short, we do it because it makes us feel superior. That’s wrong. It’s a sin.

Think about it. The only reason Jack B. Quick gets any benefit from outrunning his friend is if the bear stops to eat him instead. By judging others – to an extent – we are wishing damnation on them. We like people to compare ourselves to, because it helps us sustain the delusion of how good we are. Disciples don’t judge, because disciples want everyone to have the desire as John Wesley said to flee the wrath to come AND to succeed in that endeavor.

The tax collector knows something. He knows that he can't outrun sin. The Pharisee thinks he's good by comparison. Yet when someone called Jesus good, how did he respond? "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." (Mk10:18, Mt 19:17, Lk 18:19) As God incarnate – Jesus was good. He's the only one that could outrun sin. But instead of running for his own life, he put himself between us and sin, running the devil in circles until we could escape.

But when we deceive ourselves by judging others, we fail to take advantage of the salvation he offers. It's not just by judging righteousness or unrighteousness. It's when we cast judgment on another for anything whether their good at something or not.

That doesn't mean we can't make judgements about a particular behavior or effectiveness. But it does matter how we do it and why? Telling Steve that his shoe lace is untied so that he could be prepared to escape is a good judgement. But unless we have some help we can offer, even then what's the purpose? Does disparaging another (I think that's really the gist of the gospel's repeated injunction against judging others – that disparaging attitude) ever bring something good.

It even backfires. It does. When you're putting down someone else (Maybe I'm projecting, here. But I doubt it) when you're putting down someone else, it erects a barrier. What does she say about me? Boy, he's a bit full of himself.

As the prophet Amos says in chapter 5 verse 14, "Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said."

Disciples seek good in others. Disciples seek ways to bless and lift up others. Unlike Jesus, we can't outrun sin; but we can withstand it.

When we refuse to judge others – when we refuse to disparage others – when we're known as those who build others up with every opportunity whether that be helping them or treating everyone with the dignity and respect that are merited as one made in the image of God – we create a safe place for others to claim hope and release. Even if they never come to church – they experience a bit of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ.

Rather than satisfying ourselves that we'll get farther than that one as if that assures us of salvation, by extending blessing and grace rather than judgment we cast a cloud of holy bear spray that not only brings mercy to others but claims it for ourselves. AMEN.