

JUST THE WAY YOU ARE

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 56:1-8; Matthew 21:12-16.
Church of the Palms, July 26, 2015

Comments on the Scripture Lessons

I promised you last Sunday that our bulletin cover would display the front of the birthday card that MisterRogers (Fred Rogers) sent me in 1992. Over the photo of Fred in his trademark red sweater is the greeting, "I like you just the way you are." It is, quite obviously, the source of this sermon title.

After I had written this sermon back in late June, there was an interesting guest editorial in the Wall Street Journal on July 17. The thrust of the editorial was that "Bible-believing Christians," which it went on to define as people who "believe the whole Bible," would certainly not be voting for a certain outspoken presidential hopeful. It was not the politics of the editorial that interested me, but the term "Bible-believing Christian," which has been with us for many years.

I've often wondered why anyone would want to be described as a "Bible-believing Christian who believes the whole Bible," because Jesus was very definitely not one of them. When you look carefully at Jesus' use of scripture, you discover that there were whole sections of Hebrew scripture from which he never quoted. And when there were conflicting viewpoints in the Old Testament, as when the biblical writers of one age argue with the writers of an earlier age, Jesus chose the text that reflected his faith in a merciful and gracious heavenly Father. Then too, there was at least one occasion (his sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke 4) when he edited a quotation that did not accord with his understanding of God as friendly, benevolent, and loving. Our lessons today illustrate this interpretive method of Jesus.

In early biblical times there were commonly held religious restrictions against people who were physically impaired in various ways. According to Leviticus 21, no one could serve as a priest who had an imperfect limb, hand, or eyes. Excluded also were dwarfs, hunchbacks, or eunuchs (castrated males). Then too, there were "no trespassing" signs that denied admittance to the assembly of the Lord to foreigners (Deuteronomy 23).

However, when we listen to the prophetic voice that speaks to us in Isaiah 56, we are lifted above such legalistic limitations and summoned to create the kind of open, inclusive community in which God's house will become what it was always meant to be (v. 7): "a house of prayer for all peoples."

What is interesting is that Jesus turned to this very passage when he engaged in the cleansing of the temple on Palm Sunday. Whenever we hear sermons about this violent action of Jesus, the emphasis is nearly always upon his attack upon the merchants and the money changers. However, the telling point so often missed is that Jesus' cleansing of the temple involved much more than the overturning of the money tables; the really radical action of Jesus was that in which he dismissed the ancient taboos which disqualified the blind and the lame from even entering the temple (v.14). His ministry of healing opened the temple to them. It was in the spirit of Isaiah 56 that he did this; healing and bringing such ritually blemished folk into the temple made it what it was meant to be: "a house of prayer for all peoples."

Homily

In my June 14th sermon, I told you how, after not being raised in church or Sunday School during my early childhood, I discovered a New Testament in our attic when I was 16, and began reading and memorizing various verses. I didn't tell my parents what I was doing—and I certainly did not share this with not any of my classmates, lest I be thought of as a religious nerd. However, I finally shared my secret with the girl whose assigned seat was behind mine in biology class. Her name was Doris and she wanted to become a missionary, so I thought that I could safely tell her about my secret scripture studies. Well, one thing led to another so that, on April 1, 1945 I finally “got religion, was saved, or converted.” It was not that I responded to an altar call and “accepted Jesus.” It was not because of any sermon, and didn't even happen during a church service. Instead, while walking along a city street that Sunday afternoon, I experienced the strange and sudden assurance that I was accepted by God's grace in Christ. It was as though a door had opened and I was “let in.” Sometime thereafter, at age 17, I began preaching. Well,... it was the kind of preaching you might expect from a youthful, overly zealous convert.

It took place at the Schenectady County Jail on Sunday afternoons where I went with a small group of older church members to preach to the prisoners. It was probably good place to start learning to preach; it was truly a captive audience. As a new Christian, I wanted to do everything I could to spread the gospel, and so I jumped at this opportunity to share my faith. We had no prison chapel in which to proclaim our message; instead, we stood outside the block of cells and told our story to those would listen. Not all paid heed to our preaching; some remained in their individual cells, napping on their beds, while others listened to us.

I blush now as I realize how unprepared I was for this homiletical task, how unschooled I was about scripture, and how immature was my understanding of the Christian faith. Was it arrogance, or ignorance, or naiveté? It's a wonder that the prisoners did not revolt and complain that such cruel and unusual punishment was not specified in their sentence.

But there was one issue of faith that I did have right. I did believe that the good news about Jesus was meant for everyone, that our invitation to come to Jesus must be open to all, and that the gospel must be proclaimed in the spirit of “whosoever will may come.” Because of that, on one Sunday when I learned that a prisoner named Barney was to be released on the following Wednesday, I invited him to meet me that night at 7 o'clock in front of Proctor's Theater, and come to our Wednesday evening service. Now it happens that Barney was African-American (back then, we said “Negro”). I did not think of this as a brave or controversial action. A black family lived on our block, four doors from our home, and I had many African-American friends in my downtown high school.

On Wednesday evening, as I was being driven to church by one of the church deacons, I told him about Barney, and how I needed to be dropped off at the theater to meet him and bring him to our midweek service. I was, obviously, somewhat surprised when he said, “You can't do that. Those people have their own churches. Our church is for people who have made something of themselves.” That moment was the beginning of a very long journey. One of the high points along the way was a day in the 1950s when I was honored to stand in front of my first church and have a newspaper photographer take my picture, standing with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Another high moment came in 1962 when I was called to be pastor of a racially integrated church (20% African-American membership) in Mount Vernon, NY.

Barney didn't show up in front of the theater that evening. He probably knew, just as that deacon had indicated, that he wouldn't really be welcomed at our church. I don't know if Barney had a church, and I never heard from Barney again. However, meeting him in the county jail became a major turning point in my life.

I didn't leave that church of my teenage years. That deacon was a decent man; he was, however, bound by the blind spots and bigotries in which so many of us were commonly confined in those days. Many of the members of that church were kind and supportive of me as a new Christian. Even though the preacher seemed to be morbidly guilt ridden, a humorless homiletician whose God was to be feared, the people lived and acted as though they believed in a friendly God. From them I learned that people are often better than their beliefs.

Then too, that church did something that changed the shape of my future journey in ways that the members could neither have expected nor intended. For some reason, the pastor assigned a retired missionary to tutor me, one-on-one, in New Testament Greek. Thus, I went on to college to major in Classical Greek. Such a classical education would play an important part in my future ministry.

But my experience with Barney did begin to open my eyes to the fact that, just as the ancient Jewish Temple had a *physical architecture of exclusion*, our own "Bible-believing" church had its own *invisible architecture of exclusion*. The Temple that Jesus cleansed had an actual, physical architecture of concentric circles and boundaries that kept people in their proper place. Its design defined who was "holier than whom." At the very center was the Holy of Holies into which the high priest could enter on only one day of the year. Next came a "court" into which only priests and Levites could enter and from which the physically impaired were excluded. Next to that, ordinary Jewish laymen had their own court, and next to that, as you've already guessed, Jewish women had their own outer courtyard, from which even they were excluded during menstruation. (You can do your own reading and learn more about these "no trespassing" signs in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.)

Well, our church didn't look like that. It was a magnificent colonial structure dating from the mid-19th century. But we still had an invisible architecture of exclusion. Even though we sang the gospel chorus, "Whosoever will, whosoever will, whosoever will may come," there was a "no admittance" sign on the door to church leadership. Women could not serve as officers. We had scripture proof texts to prove it! Of course, we did not know about Jesus' interpretive method; we did not realize that scripture can be used to prove almost any preselected prejudice.

Most interesting of all was the invisible architecture of exclusion built into our missionary endeavors. We contributed such huge amounts of money to "foreign missions" that our mission budget was larger than our current expense budget—certainly an admirable goal. On our Sunday worship bulletin were the names of more than 25 of our own members who had become missionaries or pastors serving all over the world. It was as though we existed almost solely to carry the gospel to the utmost ends of the earth. We would sing, "Far, far away, in heathen darkness dwelling, millions of souls forever may be lost." One of our special mission targets was Africa. Some of my friends became medical missionaries to Africa. We went to the pier in New York City to pray and sing them off to the port of Mombasa, Kenya, from which they would go inland to (what was then) Tanganyika where they would spend the rest of their lives in missionary service.

However, within short walking distance of our downtown church there was a safe, African-American neighborhood. Even though we sent missionaries to Africa, we never made that short journey to invite people in that neighborhood to our church. We were not what some churches take as their branding slogan, a “church of the open door,” a “house of prayer for all peoples.”

Of course, things have changed for the better. In many mainline churches, it is no longer a crisis when African-Americans, Asians, or Hispanics come to worship. While there are still large denominations in which women may not serve as officers, in our own Presbyterian seminaries, women students sometimes outnumber the men preparing for ministry. However, everyone knows that there is not a level playing field for ordained women pastors as they seek a call to a congregation. Some congregations still find ways of somehow not calling a woman pastor. Then, also, many churches still have a physical architecture that limits the access of persons in wheelchairs. Restrooms at Walmart are more handicap accessible than those in most churches. And then there’s that other “hot-button” issue of sexual orientation. Even though we’ve always had gay elders and pastors in our churches, most of whom were raised in our Sunday Schools (we just pretended it was not so and didn’t talk about it), it’s still a controversy that causes some congregations to leave our denomination—they have their own set of misinterpreted texts for proving their purity! We have all found ways to relegate certain people to the sidelines of the church’s life. When we’re insiders, we fail to see how the church’s message to many people has been, and still is, “Sorry, you can’t play with us.”

When I went to my second church in Mount Vernon, NY, there was a deacon to whom I related immediately because he had made an entire life for himself by playing the harmonica. When I was a little kid, I had taught myself to play the harmonica. With two friends in Junior High School, I was part of a harmonica trio. We played mostly at nursing homes—captive audiences! It was something that faded away in my teenage years when I discovered that girls were not attracted to my harmonic artistry. But I connected immediately with Mike Chimes because he, too, had begun playing as a little kid.

As a poor kid in the nearby Bronx, Mike had found a discarded harmonica in the gutter and had taught himself to make music with it—indeed, to make an entire career for himself on the harmonica. Mike moved on to better harmonicas over the years, playing on the vaudeville stage with the famed Harmonica Rascals. Teaching his three sons to play, they became the Musical Chimes, playing on such big stages as New York’s Palace Theatre. His little instrument provided the plaintive background accompaniment for Jackie Kennedy’s tour of the Whitehouse, and his special riffs can be heard on recordings of Frank Sinatra, Neil Diamond, Harry Belafonte, Pete Seeger, and Gladys Knight. Gaining such international recognition, he worked with the Hohner Company of Germany in the improvement of the larger chord harmonicas. Mike was “world class”—but with an odd and exceptional difference.

Mike played the harmonica upside down and backwards, with the bass notes on the right rather than the left, and the high notes on the left rather than the right. When he found that first harmonica, the face plates were missing so that, when he taught himself to play, he held the harmonica upside down. It would be like asking Genevieve to lie on top of the grand piano, reach over, and play backwards. Mike never changed his upside down, backward manner of playing (even though he could play both ways). But who cares if the music is beautiful? Wouldn’t it have been a musical loss if, when he started out on his career, someone would have been so stupid as to say to him, “You can’t play with us; you’re doing it all backwards.”

And yet, how many people down through the centuries have been kept out of the mainstream symphony of life simply because they were different. Despite the fact that their life was making beautiful music to the ears and heart of God, still they were not allowed to play with the rest of us – and for no other reason than that they looked different or made their music differently. Why should such differences matter? As Duke Ellington said, “If it sounds good, it is good.”

Sadly, the world of music and the arts has been more accepting and inclusive of human differences than the church. The church gets all bent out of shape because God has “creatively cut” some people from an odd or unique pattern. We just can’t seem to accept the richness, wonder, and diversity of life!

Underneath all outward appearances, we’re all very different from one another. We are both more and less than we appear to one another on a Sunday morning. We have our own secret struggles and do battle with different demons. We play the game of life in different ways, but if we seek sincerely to follow Jesus, does it matter if my way of playing is unlike yours? So I say, “Just play it!” If it sounds good to Jesus, it must surely be good! Our church, indeed, our entire world was meant to be a house of prayer for all peoples.

So what can you and I do to make our church more truly a church of the open door? Listen to what Fred Rogers says on the front of my birthday card: “I like you just the way you are.” Say that to yourself every morning, and learn to say it to every one of God’s children all over the world. That doesn’t mean that I’m to like my “surface self,” that outer persona that we all show to the world. In that sense, I don’t like myself just the way I am, and need lots of improvement. And most of the people I’ve know who like themselves in that superficial way aren’t much fun. For that matter, it’s plainly unpleasant being around people who are impressed with their surface self.

But Fred was always speaking to our deeper, inner self, speaking to the Christ within all of us. When we read that “the Word became flesh and made his home in us” (John 1:14), it means that the Jesus who once walked upon our earth became the cosmic Christ who lives in every life. It is his decision, not ours. Christ is the unrecognized, secret Stranger who has invaded every heart. He has always been living at the back of every heart. Ever since Easter, we have been living in a Christ-haunted world. The Jesus who said that he had come to seek and save the lost is still involved in his quest to captivate every heart. He is the Stranger who will never go away. You can’t get rid of him. The world tried to get rid of him on a cruel cross, but he came right back on Easter morn—and he keeps coming back. He is secretly present, invisibly incarnate in every heart. That’s why some people are so wonderfully happy, while others are so very miserable. It’s all because of the Christ whom we cannot escape.

The happy ones are those who have said “yes” to that inner Presence. They are listening to that Other Voice, responding to what C.S. Lewis called “that other larger, stronger, quieter life” that will “come flowing in” when we welcome its presence. They have “come in out of the wind” and found a happiness the world can never give us. They may not even know the correct name of that Other One, but he knows them. They are those “other sheep” of another pasture of whom Jesus spoke (John 10:16).

The miserable ones are those who can’t get rid of this persistently loving, seeking Christ. They think they can silence that inner Voice by surrounding themselves with constant noise, leaving radios or TVs turned on even if they’re not listening or watching. Or they try to crowd him out with lots of junk, like the cars and clothes, bling and bangles, that they acquire at “dark, Satanic malls” (ala William Blake).

However they try, even after they “shop till they drop,” there’s that still, small voice in the middle of the night that tells them that “you can never have enough of what you really don’t need to make you happy” (Eric Hoffer). They just can’t shake this constant, pursuing “hound of heaven” (Francis Thompson). Some even try to get rid of Him by hating and even killing their brothers and sisters in whose lives the Christ is present. Still, He’s not going away, In fact, Jesus is working secretly in every life to make all of us what we’re meant to be. So begin by liking yourself just as you are, because the inner Christ is who you are, and he’s working to transform you into a special, unique edition of Himself.

It’s as though I’m a block of fine wood in which God sees something lovely, but something that needs lots of chiseling and carving before it becomes the beautiful piece it’s meant to be. Paul said something like that once when he wrote to the Ephesians (2:10), “For we are a “work” of his, created in Christ Jesus for good works.” The Greek word for work, (*poema*, ποίημα), is that from which we get our word, poetry. We are the living poetry that God is writing. The real “me” that God sees in me is a new, special edition of Jesus, a unique manifestation of Christ that can happen only in my life. It’s the “immortal jewel” (Gerard Manley Hopkins) or the “interior castle” (Teresa of Avila) of which the Christian mystics have always spoken. Some facet of the divine splendor is meant to be manifested in our lives. That’s who you and I really are, and in that sense, we are very likeable!

Every morning we wake up in a new place along the way of our journey toward our true self in Christ. God starts out all over again on every morning, sending us new challenges, lessons, and people who are necessary to our completion; that’s why some of them are even abrasive and necessary to our polishing. So “walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone” (George Fox). Enjoy the music and poetry that God is making in your life, and take time to enjoy that same artistry of God in the lives of others. And don’t ever forget the gospel according to Duke Ellington: “If it sounds good, it is good.”