

Sermon for Sunday, June 3, 2018 - "Take Another Look"

Second Sunday after Pentecost
Reconciling in Christ Sunday,
June 3, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Last week, when I was in Washington, DC, I heard some powerful preaching and teaching. Perhaps the most powerful, for me, was a story about a woman named Ms. Virginia Jones. Ms. Virginia was the building president in a low-income housing area in New Jersey. One day a young lawyer came to talk with her. He'd just moved into the building because he wanted to make a difference in a struggling community. He sought out Ms. Virginia to tell her he was there to help her. Ms. Virginia looked skeptical. He made sure to tell her he was a graduate of Stanford and Yale Law School - mentioned that a few times, actually. She didn't seem overjoyed by his presence, so he just kept talking.

Finally, she interrupted him and said, "Follow me". She led him down to the street and said, "Tell me what you see." The young lawyer described the crack houses, the crime, the things that had been stolen from his car the night he moved in- all the problems. The more he talked, the more disappointed she looked. Finally, she shook her head, "You can't help me", and she walked away.

The young lawyer ran and caught up with her. "What do you mean, what are you talking about?" he asked. Ms. Virginia turned and said, "Boy, you need to understand something. The world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside you. If you are one of those people who only sees darkness and despair and problems, that's all there's gonna be. But if you are one of those stubborn people who every time you open your eyes you see beauty, you see love, you see possibilities, you see the face of God, then you can be one of those people who helps me." What we see matters.

In our Gospel story today, the Pharisees spend a lot of time looking at Jesus, watching him closely, but they don't see clearly.

When Jesus and his hungry disciples pick some heads of grain, the Pharisees say, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" As Jesus enters the synagogue, the Pharisees keep their eyes locked on him. A man with a withered hand approaches Jesus. The Pharisees watch to see whether Jesus will cure on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him of breaking the law. When they look at the man with the withered hand, they don't see a beloved child of God. Instead, they see an opportunity to trap Jesus.

Jesus looks at the Pharisees with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart. Jesus looks at them the way Ms. Virginia looked at that young lawyer. He knows that they can't see clearly because their hearts are hardened.

Jesus must so often look at us the same way - grieved at our hardness of heart and our inability to really see one another.

Jesus must so often want to take us out on the streets of our country and ask us, "Tell me, what do you see?" If Jesus asked us this, I think we'd tell him about all the problems, all the difficult people who just don't get it, who need to be corrected. "*They* are so angry, so judgmental, so extreme." And then I think Jesus would say something like, "The world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside of you." Jesus sees all of that junk inside each of us and it grieves him. But that isn't all he sees. Jesus also sees so much beauty, love and possibility, so much of God in each and every one of us. Jesus sees you for who you truly are: beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold. Jesus gazes upon us with love.

Being regarded in this way, with love, can change our hearts and help us to see differently.

Some other insight I received last week from contemplative teacher Richard Rohr helped to flesh this out for me. He described our tendency to see in a dualistic way - dividing the world between good and bad, right and wrong, black and white - and then assigning people to these categories.

This kind of seeing hardens our hearts and keeps us from beholding others as beloved of God. Yet, when we experience God's loving gaze and know our original goodness, then we can look at others with respect.

To respect someone, Rohr said, literally means to take a second look - re-spect, relook. The first time we look at someone, our instincts kick in. We make quick judgements and stereotype - that's what our brain does. We assess quickly: is this person safe, is this person like me, are we in the same tribe? That is natural and instinctual; but if we only look that way, we don't truly see the other person.

We show respect to a person when we look at them again in order to see beyond the quick judgement, to behold the person as beloved of God. When *we* are regarded with love, then we can offer another loving look to others.

For centuries, the church has viewed people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer with judgment. They've been seen as a problem. Yet the problem is not *out there* with *those* people, the problem is within - within the church's way of thinking and interpreting scripture that has been so influenced by dualism. Dualistic thinking leads us to demand rigid separations between male and female, gay and straight, body and spirit. It leads us to demand conformity. Thanks be to God, the church is taking another loving look at our LGBTQ siblings. And these siblings are helping the church to move beyond dualistic thinking, helping the church to see that God didn't make a world that is black and white with maybe a few dull shades of gray in-between. God made the rainbow - all of us. God made you and God adores you.

Whenever we judge and condemn each other, as we all do in so many ways, God looks upon us with anger, grieved at our hardness of heart. Yet even then, God also looks upon us with such love. God always sees beyond all our faults and failings. God always see *you* as beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold.

May God's long, loving look at each of us change our hearts - may it help us to see one another with love.

Let's take a moment of silent prayer.

