

The Appearance of Things

There's a story going around that's gotten a lot of attention.

The editor of Christianity Today, a conservative evangelical magazine, was interviewed about what's happening in many evangelical churches.

He told the interviewer that he's been hearing stories from many pastors, who, having preached about the sermon on the mount, (when Jesus admonishes us to love our enemy, do good to those who hurt us, and to walk the extra mile), are being confronted by their parishioners.

And the confrontations are very similar from church to church.

The parishioners admonish the pastors for using "liberal talking points" from the pulpit.

When the pastors respond that no, they're simply quoting Jesus himself, the parishioners, almost to a person, rather than apologizing or engaging in some self-reflection, tell the pastors that such ideas are "weak" and "they don't work anymore."

So what's going on?

It seems that Christian nationalism is responsible for this reaction to the central teachings of Jesus.

Christian nationalism is wrapped up in power, domination, patriarchy, and authoritarianism.

In other words, it's completely consumed with what's going on — on the outside of things.

Which is exactly what is happening in our lessons today.

Beginning with the gospel.

Here we have the religious do-gooders criticizing the people who don't have enough money to buy a bar of soap – for not engaging in ritual cleansing.

Jesus uses this as an opportunity to talk about what actually matters in life.

And what matters is what's going on **inside** of us, not what's going on **outside** of us.

But if we think that that's an easy lesson to learn, the second half of the gospel shows just how hard it is to actually judge from the inside out rather than from the outside in.

Because in the very next story, we have Jesus himself who, having just schooled the Pharisees about judging from the inside out, not from the outside in; well, here's Jesus doing the Pharisee thing with the Syro-Phoenician woman.

At first blush, he sees her only as an outside gentile.

And he dismisses her.

It's only her insistence, and her abject humility, born from her devotion to her daughter, that allows Jesus himself to change, and then to judge her from the inside out, rather than from the outside in.

So, if the best person who ever lived struggles with this way of life, imagine how you and I will struggle with it!

It's human nature to judge from the outside in.

All of the consternation these days about people with different sexual orientations, about drag queens, immigrants and persons of color, all of this is rooted in our innate human need to judge from the outside in – rather than from the inside out.

“Don't judge a book by its cover” the common saying goes.

And yet, who among us doesn't do exactly that, everyday?

Today, we have a demagogue running again for president.

It matters little to his devout followers that he's been indicted now four times with dozens of serious felonies.

It doesn't matter that the interior workings of this man seem to be completely consumed with egotism, narcissism, and bigotry.

Rather, his followers seem to adore him because of what they see on the outside.

Purported strength, blunt talk, and dare we say it, permission to hate others.

The appearance of things can mislead us.

When we mistake military power or economic prowess for moral goodness, we find ourselves in very dangerous places.

After all, the proof that Jesus **could not be** the Messiah — is that he was crucified.

The appearance of things can mislead us.

So I laughed when several of my Roman Catholic friends mentioned to me that the only church in Lahaina that was not burned to the ground was the Maria Lanikila Roman Catholic Church.

Many of them said, with a wry smile, “ah, the one true church.”

I smiled because I knew that another church also survived the flames in Lahaina: The Mormon Church.

And you can't get much farther apart in our Christian faith than between Rome and the Mormons.

So which is favored by God?

Perhaps the better, and truer answer is: they were both just lucky.

Judging by appearances is what gets Joseph's brothers into all kinds of trouble this morning.

As we heard last week, his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt.

And you who've seen the rock opera Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat, know the story.

He's sold into slavery, works for a rich man whose wife seduces him, Joseph resists her and she responds by claiming Joseph violated her.

Joseph is thrown into prison where he gains a reputation as a reliable interpreter of dreams.

Egypt's pharaoh then starts having very strange dreams.

He dreams about fat cows coming up out of the Nile with super skinny cows following them, devouring the fat cows.

He dreams of fat ears of corn coming in from the harvest, only to be devoured by a series of raggedy thin ears of corn.

Joseph is summoned from the prison.

He interprets the dreams for pharaoh and predicts seven years of feast, followed by seven years of famine.

He sees the need to create stock piles of food to meet the coming emergency.

Joseph is placed in charge of this effort.

During the feast years, he gathers in the grain – and when the famine hits, his family in far off Canaan hears that Egypt has food to spare.

Joseph's brothers set off for Egypt, and come face-to-face with their brother Joseph.

But because they are judging by appearances, they don't recognize him.

I can tell you that if I hadn't seen my brother in 20 years, I'm pretty sure I'd still recognize him.

I'm pretty sure you'd still recognize your long-lost brother too.

But such is the power of appearances that none of Joseph's 11 brothers recognize this prince of Egypt, until he finally tells them who he is, as the scales fall from their eyes — and at long last — they see.

Then, judging from the inside out, Joseph comes to see that God can do amazing things even with reprehensible acts.

Joseph forgives his brothers because, seeing from the inside out, Joseph realizes that his brothers treachery was a necessary step in ensuring that Joseph became the man he was destined to become.

And finally there is Paul in his letter to the Romans.

Then as now, antisemitism is a vicious disease.

Just as in Charlottesville several years ago when Nazis and right wingers marched, shouting "Jews shall not replace us," Paul was confronting enmity against the Jewish people, an enmity that came from many newly converted Christians.

Confronting that false reliance on appearances, Paul insists that God is faithful to God's chosen people, and that the Jewish people always have been, and always will be, the apple of God's eye.

Paul comes to see that somehow, God uses our flakiness, our disobedience, our obstinance, to write straight with the crooked lines that we each of us are.

And Paul understands something else today.

He understands that God's intention is to have every last human being.

I wonder why we struggle so hard with this idea of universal salvation?

Why does it seem so important to us that only some will be saved and many others will be cursed or damned?

Somehow I can't help but think that that is a consequence of our chronic need to judge — from the outside in — rather than from the inside out.

It's a result of our mistaken reliance on the appearance of things.

And what Paul is assuring us today is that God, in their infinite wisdom, mercy, and justice, when they judge us from the inside out, will bring about such a change of heart and mind and soul, even in the worst of us, that all will be transformed — into life and love and joy.

This is the promise of our faith.

This is our hope.

+amen.