

American novelist Ann Lamott once said, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out God hates all the same people you do.” We can particularly relate to this sentiment today as our world and country continue to grow all the more divisive. God is only on the side of whoever’s right, right? Which then begs the question: who’s right?

Misquoting Jesus, some say “If they’re not for us, they’re against us”. Little do they know the phrase is actually, “Whoever **isn’t** against us is for us,” which gives off an entirely different sentiment. It’s the difference between saying one’s glass is half empty or half full. Which begs the next set of questions, when did we get so good at deciphering what is good, who is good, what is bad and inherently flawed, and who should just move along because they’re in the wrong? When every problem, every categorical delineation of a person or thing, and every human heart is actually far more complicated than they seem at face value, why are we so quick to think in terms of black and white?

Maybe this is what Jesus was getting at in his direct response to the rich, young ruler in our Gospel text for this morning. We open with the rich young ruler saying, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s a perfectly legitimate question but Jesus isn’t ever fooled by a teacher’s pet. He’s more interested in what’s really going on inside this man’s mind and heart. Jesus’ response is, “Why do you call me good? By this, perhaps Jesus was meaning, “What does “good” mean to you anyway? Only God is truly good. As for you, rich, young man, God knows your human declarations or performances of goodness are a bit more self-involved. Sure, you wanna look good in front of all these people, but I’m not buying it!

Albeit, his performance has a lot to do with the state of the human condition. We’re sinful creatures and if we’re not intentional about holding ourselves and each other carefully in light of our differences, we start picking sides and pointing fingers, all the while posing like we’re doing all the right things. I dislike facing this and other sinful truths about ourselves. The concept of sin is so weighed down. There have been so many poor, manipulative, or harmful interpretations of what sin is on behalf of the church, I often cringe at the sound of the word. Yet, one can’t really talk about the yin of God’s grace without talking about the yang. So let’s take a closer look at not just sin but the full, complex capacities of the human heart that can move us beyond being posers or categorical black and white thinkers. Let me be clear, though, I’m not so much suggesting we choose to live a life in the gray. How boring! Following Christ is a truly vibrant and colorful way to go about living. So here’s to following Christ in full technicolor!

We’ll start by going back to the rich, young ruler. Jesus knew this man wasn’t being true to himself or God. Sure, he had followed all the commandments since his youth but his love for his possessions had gotten in the way of him extending himself upward and outward, which is really sin boiled down. His possessions were cutting him off from his vertical relationship to God and his horizontal relationship to others. See what I’m doing here with my hand? I am making the sign of the cross to symbolize what our relationships should look like when we’re living life in full color. Stated differently, this man was posing as being all righteous, but Christ could see right into him. He wasn’t being truthful to himself or God, so Christ took the thing that was the most important to him, that being wealth, and directed him to give it all away.

Money is just one thing that can do this to a person. It's a tool for living that in and of itself isn't bad. When it starts to get in the way of us loving God and neighbor, however--which it often does because when people have money they often assert more power over others than they should--when this happens, we need to take off our blinders to see God's colorful world more clearly. This is what I think Jesus is getting at when he speaks of rich people being less likely to enter the kingdom of God than a camel going through the eye of a needle. The eye of a needle could be in reference to an actual needle or an ancient gate into Jerusalem or there are other theories that exist out there about this verse. No matter the metaphor, Jesus is making one thing clear: love of God and neighbor go hand-in-hand in the heart or mind of any person truly seeking eternal life.

Money isn't the only thing that proves to be a stumbling block for us, though. What about party affiliation? Gah! Is there anything more frustrating in our modern world than the state of our political, public lives? What has come of things is an inability to hold tension in public relationships. Our private/personal relationships are a different story when tension exists, but out in the public, we should be challenging ourselves to engage. That's what civility is all about. Civility doesn't really mean "politeness." Civil stems from the word citizen, which means interaction with others while living in and among them when it comes to public life and what governs our lives.

Yet, these days, we are quick to scorn and condemn anyone who doesn't think like us, cutting them completely out of our lives in the name of our personal comfort and perceptions of safety. Friends, this certainly isn't what Jesus modeled for us. Jesus definitely made some waves by not closing himself off but using confrontation as an engagement tool, as a way to challenge people to think in ways they hadn't before. I'm not at all condoning we go about starting arguments that make everyone mad or engage in ways that get us killed like Jesus but we can take some pointers from his tactics.

Confrontation, for example, when broken down, really only means to stand face-to-face or technically forehead-to-forehead with someone--*con* meaning "with or "together" and *fron* meaning "forehead." So just picture yourself mashed up forehead-to-forehead with someone as you respectfully divulge your opinions and concerns about the world. What a hilarious picture; yet, anything of the sort rarely happens anymore or, if it does, it turns disrespectful and violent.

This isn't the way, my friends. God knows, respectful, civil debate makes the world go round! It also makes life SO much more colorful. Do you think God in God's love for diversity didn't also create us to think differently? So I want to encourage you to keep working at engagement, even when it's hard or sometimes hurtful. We have to practice it to get good at it. We have to make a conscious effort to not lean so much on our sensitivities in the public arena so as to remain in public relationships with folks or our social fabric will continue to fray, I'm afraid. To allow our political affiliations to become a stumbling block for loving God and neighbor is not what it means to be to live in technicolor.

There's a million other things that can become sinful barriers or stumbling blocks for us when it comes to holding true to our relationships with God and neighbor. It could be power but the power we crave that is lorded over others vs. the power we all hold when

we work together for the sake of the common good. It could be status; hence Jesus' constant insistence that the first will be last and the last will be first. It could be tradition and a "we've always done it that way" mentality. It could be religion itself!

So, note what you're listening to on the radio or from the nosebleed section of a giant stadium if ever some renowned evangelist is speaking to you and the masses. Does the message portrayed only speak to your vertical, personal relationship to God and your personal salvation vs. God's grace and salvation of the whole world for the sake of all in Christ? Does it leave out what should be our outstretched love for our neighbor, Christians and non-Christians alike? Does the preacher speak in terms of black and white or what are the array of colors representing God's love for the diversity of creation? Does what someone is saying leave room for nuance and the complexity of what it means to be human or is this said person fitting you and others into tiny little, suffocating boxes?

Just some things to think about as you leave from here today. As you go about your week, think about your life. How are you living? What delineations are getting in your way of loving God and neighbor? Like he did to the rich, young ruler, is Christ asking you to remove whatever is getting in your way of seeing or living life to its fullest? Whether it's anything we mentioned this morning, whether it's poverty, hunger, thirst, or even perceived weakness, we can get beyond what we think are barriers to living a life as God intended. Let us stand and sing about that now, knowing nothing need separate us from the love of God we have in Christ Jesus as we move into acts of loving and serving our neighbors because of this love. Amen.