

Look Again
Ephesians 5:4-18

Good Morning Everyone, it's good to be together this morning, together here in this room and together with those on the livestream as well.

Who here in this room consider themselves to be a good judge of character? It's a running joke in our marriage that I am a terrible judge of character, and Taylor is especially gifted at it.

Or, let's put that question another way, who here has ever misjudged someone, for good or for bad? I remember in high school having two friends, one who was certainly more gregarious, and outgoing than the other. The other friend, I'm really embarrassed to say now, I thought was "boring". I was always trying to spend time with the first friend, get closer to her, be in her circle, often to no avail. When my mom would suggest that I give my other friend a call, try to get together, I'd say, "Mom, she's boring." As we grew through highschool, and through the friendship drama that was often a part of high school life, who was the friend who was faithful, present, and encouraging? The one I had deemed boring. She was the friend who prayed for me. The friend who was setting an example of character. The friend who was present to me in some very difficult times and some very beautiful times-including as a bridesmaid on my wedding day.

In today's lectionary texts, we find two stories about "judging" which reveal something about both human nature and God's clear calling on our lives and God's grace when we fall short of that calling.

The first is the story of David's Anointing from Samuel 16:1-13. At the opening of this passage, God is having a conversation with Samuel, the Prophet. And Samuel is...well, he's sulking. He's sulking because it's clear that God is no longer with the current King of Israel, Saul. Samuel had really wanted this to work out. On paper, Saul was perfect. Saul came from an esteemed family. Saul's Father was very wealthy and well respected. Saul is "a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people." Saul had that movie star quality that a nation is looking for in a king, that would make other nations envious.

Unfortunately, despite his star quality, Saul's reign as Israel's first king turned out to be a bit of a dumpster fire. He was disobedient, impatient and unwilling to do as the Lord commanded him. So, God turned away from Saul and set his sights on a new king. At the opening of Samuel chapter 16, God says to Samuel, why are you still grieving over Saul? I have rejected him as King- now grab your anointing supplies and go see a man named Jesse, for I have chosen one of his son's to be the next King." So Samuel sets out to see Jesse and his sons. Samuel meets the family, and as he sees the Oldest Son, Eliab, Samuel thinks, surely this fine young man is the one. Nope, replies God, and then he cautions Samuel, ""Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his

stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." One by one, the Lord rejects each of Jesse's seven sons as they pass by him, and Samuel is feeling incredibly confused.

He says to Jesse, Is this it? These are all your boys? You have no more sons? And Jesse tells Samuel there is one more, but he really IS just a boy. Jesse told him to stay in the fields watching the sheep because he assumed today's events didn't apply to him. Samuel asks Jesse to bring him at once, and when the boy, David, arrives God says to Samuel "This is the one." As surprised as Jesse, Samuel, and David's Brother might have been, David himself was probably surprised, yet this was the heart that God desired. The one that God had judged as worthy of leading his beloved people. That's story number one.

The New Testament passage for this Sunday tells the story of Jesus healing a man born blind. In the story, found in John 9, Jesus and his disciples are walking together and they see a blind man sitting in a ditch alongside the road, presumably begging. The disciples know who the man is, he was born blind, not as the result of an accident or disease, and they say to Jesus, "'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" You can almost picture Jesus stopping short, and going "You guys, for real, how are you asking that question?" Jesus says, "Nobody sinned! The power and light of God will be revealed in this man!" And Jesus, spits in the dirt, makes mud and wipes in on the man's eyes. He tells the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam and he

will be healed. The man does as Jesus says and returns to him able to see! People in the village see him walking around and, honestly, think the man is someone else! The scripture literally says, people said, "That's him! The man born blind!" and others would say, "No, that's just some guy who looks like him!" And the man who was healed says, "People! It's me!" It's a very odd and funny passage.

When the man explains what happened, that Jesus spread mud on his eyes and told him to wash in the pool, and he could see, the man is brought before Pharisees. The man tells the Pharisees what happened and they are shocked, not because of the miracle, but because Jesus performed his healing on the Sabbath. They demand to know who the man thinks Jesus is. And the man says, "I think he's a prophet."

The Pharisees REFUSE to believe that this man was born blind, so they call THE GROWN MAN'S PARENTS to testify. And the parents tell the same story -Yes, this is our son. Yes, he was born blind. No, we don't know how he was healed. Also, ASK HIM, HE'S A GROWN UP. So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man, this Jesus, is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?"

If I had to give one title to these two stories, I'd go, "Adventures in missing the point" or "This guy? Really?" What these two stories have in common is that we, people, often misjudge a situation, jump to the wrong conclusions, and allow our own biases to take control. David is deemed unfit to be the future King of Israel -he's just a boy! He has much more established, good looking, qualified older brothers. Jesus is deemed a sinner, disobedient to the laws of Moses, for healing on the Sabbath. The man born blind is clearly a liar, and a sinful one at that, having been born blind.

But as I was writing this sermon, I thought, "Okay, so humans aren't great at judging someone's true intentions." It's an interesting illustration about human nature, I thought, but what does that have to do with the gospel? What is the point of these two stories in terms of our faith, of living out the love of Jesus in the world? What is the good news about the fact that we're really bad at this?

That's where the text that Carrol read for us comes in. I'm going to read that text again and I invite you to hold these two stories in mind: "For you were once darkness, but now

you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Thanks to Jesus, thanks to the Light he brought to this world through his ministry, his death and resurrection, and the light that is continually offered to us by the Holy Spirit, we can see people in a totally different light. We can see others as God sees them. We no longer have to “judge by the outward appearance, instead we can look at the thoughts and intentions of others.” We can now see an obedient heart, a person longing to be faithful to God, rather than a shepherd boy, the least of all the brothers. We can rejoice in a miracle, rather than being caught up in legalistic rules. The light of Jesus opens us up to a new way of understanding ourselves and others.

Talking about “judging” others is a really tricky one. So much harm has been done by the churches and pastors who create, judge and enforce certain behaviours; it becomes a tool of saying “you’re in, or you’re out”. Or worse, we understand God as only the judge, determined to catch us slipping up, ready to pronounce us a failure. Those ideas are not at the heart of the gospel.

At the same time, this Ephesians text tells us how we “should be judging” ourselves and others; the standard to hold to is by “fruit of their light” The fruit of their character, their actions, how they live and move in the world. Paul isn’t saying “you can’t judge people”, rather, Paul is saying that our judgment needs to be based on the fruit of spirit, rather than our bias or our all too human terms of evaluation.

Jesus, in Matthew Chapter 7, says this to the crowd, “Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can’t produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can’t produce good fruit. So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.”

I think about these ideas a LOT as a Pastor. The Walrus, a Canadian Cultural Magazine, recently published a lengthy article about Bruxy Cavey and the Meeting House Church, an Anabaptist affiliated church in Hamilton, Ontario. Cavy resigned from the Meeting House following allegations of spiritual abuse and sexual impropriety. When I read the article, it’s clear that Cavy was and is an electric personality. People were drawn to the meeting house because of him, his preaching style, his ability to ask hard questions in an honest way and his amazing skills at relating to people. But what stands out in regards to what happened is how readily the leadership in the church was willing

to ignore a clear lack of character and “good fruit” in Cavey for the sake of church growth. The rush to uplift a relatively young, charismatic leader when perhaps more roots were needed to grow first. I wonder if we, as the Capital C Church, have been so eager (with the best of intentions) to let go of harmful, judgemental mentalities, that we’ve forgotten about spiritual discipleship, character growth, and the patient ferment of Godliness. These are real teachings in Scripture; there is no shortcut to sanctification. As your pastor, I ask you, please don’t let me forget that.

One final thought before I close. We need to hold one another, and especially spiritual leaders to a standard that was exemplified by Jesus, and also know that when we stumble, when we fail, as we all will, the grace of Jesus is spilling over for us. When I pray for my own kids, I often pray that they will grow up loving God and loving the church, and in the same breath that they will know they are loved by God and loved by this church. I want to honor their efforts, their strivings in life to be people to show the love of Jesus, not berate them for the times that they get it wrong. And I think the tender, parent heart of God towards us, his beloved children, hopes the same. That we will choose to live as children of light. That we will make ourselves faithful, available and teachable. That we will keep aiming ourselves towards Jesus, trusting that God will bring forth good fruit, and offering grace to ourselves and others. Let’s aim to judge ourselves and others by the standard that God judges us, and extend to one another and ourselves that same grace, available to us through Jesus Christ. Amen