

A Simple (?) Misunderstanding – VIRTUAL EDITION
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Westminster Presbyterian Church - Ontario, CA
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Year A - 14th Sunday In Ordinary Time
Matthew 11:16-19

Have you ever felt like you were completely misunderstood? Like nobody in the world understood who you were, what you were about or what you were going through? Ever become aware that the people around you saw you as being one thing when you felt like you were something else completely?

I think just about everybody goes through something like that at some point in their lives, usually but not exclusively in adolescence. When I was in high school, for example, I was often very uncomfortable in social situations. This had mainly to do with a lack of self-confidence, a fear that if I spoke up I'd say the wrong thing or otherwise make a fool out of myself. But my peer group did not see me as uncomfortable; they saw me as being vain and stuck-up, as if I felt like I was too good for everybody else. No matter what I tried to do, it seemed like I only reinforced that generally-held misunderstanding of my behavior. Once a perception is out there, it becomes very hard to change.

When Jesus walked out of His home town of Nazareth and embarked on His life of ministry, He knew to a certainty that he was going to be misunderstood, not by everyone but by a very large and powerful chunk of His culture. Jesus knew His words would be mis-heard, His deeds mis-perceived and His motivations mis-interpreted. He knew that no matter what He did or said, a lot of people just weren't going to get it and that this collective misunderstanding of Him and His mission was going to result in a very painful and humiliating death.

And I have to think that there was something very liberating about Jesus accepting the

reality that He would be massively misunderstood. There would be absolutely no point in trying to correct those misunderstandings or change peoples' minds. Jesus lived His life with a hard, raw and dangerous honesty. There was no sugarcoating, no mincing of words, no attempt to find a common ground. Those with ears would hear; those without wouldn't.

The same appears to have been true about John The Baptist. John understood his mission as the herald proclaiming Jesus' mission. John also spoke with incredible honesty and often very bluntly. John seems to have relished confrontation. John liked getting in peoples' faces, calling them out on their dishonesty and hypocrisy and risking severe punishment by the powerful men he antagonized.

So, it is absolutely no wonder at all that Jesus of Nazareth and John The Baptist were the objects of vicious slander and character assassination. And Jesus was apparently well aware of what was being said. The labels being on them were absolutely vile. John, who neither ate nor drank (at least in public), was called a "demon," which was the equivalent of being tagged as a servant of Satan. Jesus, way over at the other end of spectrum, was called a "glutton and a drunkard."

The "glutton and a drunkard" language was worse than mere defamation. The exact same language appears in the 21st chapter of Deuteronomy as a reason to stone a man to death. This wasn't idle gossip; this was a call for Jesus to be executed. I know we often say that words alone cannot injure us; but when words incite others to violence . . . yes they can injure us.

As we move through life and interact with a wide variety of personalities, we often make very quick judgments about people on the basis of very limited information. I'm afraid that's just human nature and no one ever has a perfectly clean record on that score. I have to confess that I

have been guilty of forming some very flawed perceptions of others, rushing in with quick judgments that later proved to be 180 degrees in the wrong direction. I have been a victim and I have been a perpetrator. I would like to think that a ton of life experience and maturity have rid me of the curse of making hasty judgements but I still do it from time to time.

Jesus tells us many times that our job as Christians is not to judge but to accept and to love. In the wake of the social upheaval that our nation has experienced these past few months, it is more urgent than ever that we try very hard to look past first impressions and resist the strong temptations we all feel to label, categorize and judge.

The United States of America, whose independence we celebrated yesterday, began as a grand and glorious experiment in uniting a very diverse population with some very diverse opinions and worldviews into a single people. That experiment was and is very much informed by Christian values of love, compassion and acceptance. As practicing Christians, we must always be in the forefront of efforts to make the American experiment work.

On this Fourth of July weekend, may we renew our efforts to be the best Americans we can be, the best Christians we can be, the best people we can be. And if some misunderstand, so be it. That didn't stop John The Baptist; that didn't stop Jesus; and it should never stop us.