

“How’s Your Vision?”
Matthew 6:22-23, 7:1-5
3rd Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville
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A little over 200 years ago, Jane Austen published her widely read and popular novel about Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. If you have never read the novel, maybe you saw the movie...this comedy of mistaken judgments, of misunderstood love.

When Mr. Darcy first meets Elizabeth, he says of her, “She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me.”

For her part, Elizabeth believes Mr. Darcy to be a pompous and arrogant boor, and says that he is “the last man in the world who [she] could ever be prevailed on to marry.”

Later in the novel, of course, Mr. Darcy reveals himself to be anything but cold-hearted when he secretly helps Elizabeth’s family extricate themselves from a potentially embarrassing scandal.

And when Elizabeth finds out what Mr. Darcy has done, her feelings for Mr. Darcy change, and Elizabeth becomes Mrs. Darcy in the end.

What novel is this?

Pride and Prejudice.

But do you know what Jane Austen’s original title was?

First Impressions.

It’s a story as old as humanity itself, and we know it by many names.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

“Beauty is more than skin deep.”

One of the most popular versions of this story these days is the musical *Wicked*, in which the Wicked Witch of the West (who in my estimation is one of the best villains ever imagined in childhood literature or film)...she gets a rewrite so radical that we now understand her to be altruistic, well-intentioned, misunderstood but not mean...

The message is simple, right?
 Be careful about first impressions.
 Be cautious before passing judgment.

It's not a far cry from what Jesus says in our text for today:

“Do not judge, so that you will not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.”

Of course, the reality is that we're passing judgment all the time.
 We can't help ourselves.
 It even happens in church.
 Or maybe especially in church.

Do you remember the sermon in which I wondered what would happen if we ever put screens in our sanctuary?

I said very clearly in that sermon that I have no plans to do this.
 I still say that I have no plans to do this.

What I loved that day was the responses from y'all coming out of worship...you know what I heard?

I heard:

We can't ever have screens in our sanctuary!
I'm not coming to worship here if we put screens in the sanctuary.

And I heard:

Ben, the words in the hymnal are too small for me to read. I can't join in when everybody else sings. It sure would help me if we had a way to project the words for our hymns on a screen in the sanctuary.

What's more important, when it comes to worshiping God?
Not having a screen?
Or everyone being able to sing?

Do not misunderstand, this is not a sermon promoting screens in the sanctuary.

It's a sermon about judgment.
And the truth is, we pass judgment all the time, every day.
But judgment isn't always a bad thing.
Sometimes it's a helpful thing.

As I've told you before, when I graduated from college, I moved to the East Coast to work at a poverty law agency. I was a paralegal that year, working in Hartford, Connecticut, representing people who had been denied Social Security Disability Benefits.

Now this was over 30 years ago, when the HIV/AIDS epidemic was rampant in many American cities...and most of the clients with whom I worked that year were people who needed the disability benefit, because their lives had been overturned by the AIDS crisis.

The summer before I began my job, I was telling a friend about what I was planning to do, and I said, "I'm going to be working with AIDS victims."

And she replied, “Not AIDS victims. People with AIDS.”
I replied, “That’s what I said.”
And she replied, “Ben, that’s not what you said.”

It took me a moment to see what she was getting at.

She was talking about how I would see the people with whom I would be working. Not as victims. But as people. As children of God, living in poverty, fighting for their lives against a God-awful disease.

Were those words of gentle judgment that she placed on me?
Absolutely.
But she wasn’t just carefully trying to change the way I spoke.
She was trying to change the way I viewed someone else,
the way I looked at someone else.

It’s a much deeper change.
And I think that’s why I’ve carried her words with me ever since.

I said a moment ago that this is a sermon about judgment.
And it is that.
But it’s also a sermon about something more than that.

Because the judgments we make often arise from a much deeper place than our politics, our professed beliefs, or even our personal experience.

According to Jesus, **our judgments have something to do with our vision.** They arise from the ways that we see God, and the world God has given us, and the neighbors God has placed in front of us.

Do you remember our first text for today?

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness...”

Jesus is talking **about how we see one another.**

How we see the member of our family who is trying our patience right now.

How we see the person who lives at the Soteria house for women, who's trying to get back on her feet right now.

Jesus is talking how we see the person struggling with addiction.

And about how we see the person who lives in the mansion that's just a few blocks away, and good grief, couldn't they have spent their money in more generous ways?

Jesus is talking about how you see the person in the pew behind you, who believes different things about the war with Iran than you do.

Jesus is talking about how we see ourselves, and the ways in which we exercise our self-righteousness, and the ways in which we comprehend our need for God's grace, and another person's grace.

I'm reminded of a story that the theologian Stanley Hauerwas tells about his father.

Hauerwas grew up in Texas, and his father was a frontiersman. His dad herded cows, lived a rugged and outdoors life.

As Hauerwas puts it, “Living with a gun was...as natural to [my father] as living with an automobile is for me.”

So his dad expressed his love in the way of the frontier:
not with OUTWARD signs of affection,
but by ensuring his family's survival,
giving them opportunities that he had never had.

This meant his son, Stanley, got to go to college, where he studied philosophy and theology and entered a world that was very different than his father's world.

Then Hauerwas went to divinity school. Not to become a pastor, but to study some more. And the gap between his world and his dad's world continued to widen.

Whenever Stanley Hauerwas called home, his father would talk about a gun that he was making:

"...everything from boring the barrel and setting the sight, to hand-carving the stock. I thought that was fine, since it certainly had nothing to do with me."

One summer, Hauerwas made his customary trip home. No sooner was he through the front door than his father thrust the completed rifle into his son's hands, giving it to him as a gift.

"It was indeed a beautiful piece of craftsmanship," Hauerwas writes. "And I immediately allowed as such, but I was not content to stop there..."

"I said [to my dad], 'Of course you realize that it will not be long before [our] society [is] going to have to take all these things away from you people.'"

At the time, Stanley Hauerwas thought he was saying what needed to be said.

Only later did he come to the conclusion that what he said that day, to his father, was—in Hauerwas’s own words—“one of the lowest points of my ‘moral development.’”

“For what my father was saying, of course...[was how much he cared about me]. But all I could see was a gun...”¹

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness...”

Today’s text, of course, is not the last time Jesus talks about vision, or the log of self-righteousness that so often clouds what we can see.

Later in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about all this.

It’s a story about early morning workers, and mid-day workers, and late-in-the-day workers, and as the sun is about to set, all those workers line up to receive their pay.

But the boss has something unexpected in mind.
He pays the late-in-the-day workers a daily wage.
It’s the same that the early morning workers receive!

And those early-morning workers, what do they do?
They grumble.
They complain.

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, “A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic,” Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1981. I first learned of this story in “The Senses of Preaching,” by Thomas G. Long, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.

They say, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

Fairness...is all that those early morning workers can see.

To which the boss says, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

Now, there’s a more literal way to translate the Greek.
I like it better.

What the boss actually says is this:

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?
Or is your eye evil because I am good?”

Friends, we are three weeks into the season of Lent.
And Lent is a season of introspection.

When you take a closer look at what’s going on in your heart these days, what do you see?

How’s your vision?

It strikes me that one of the most faithful prayers any of us can pray, not just during the season of Lent, but during any season of our lives, goes something like this:

“Dear God, help me to see the parts of my life that I don’t want to see.”

Have you ever prayed that prayer?

“God, help me to see the parts of my life that I don’t want to see.”

If you do happen to pray that prayer, in the days or weeks ahead, do not forget, don’t ever forget the ENVELOPE in which that prayer goes to God.

The envelope is always the good news of the gospel.
And the good news of the gospel is this:

God can help us see what we don’t want to see.
God is eager to sharpen our vision, not only of ourselves, but of God’s love.

And in Jesus Christ, God promises us the grace we need to change, to grow, to become the person whom God has created us to be.

Did anyone here go to see *Les Miserables* at the Peace Center recently?

Do you recall the scene in which the thief Jean Valjean is welcomed into the house of a bishop?

The bishop treats Jean Valjean as if he were a member of the bishop’s own family, giving him food and a place to sleep. In the middle of the night, however, Jean Valjean steals the bishop’s silver,
gets caught by the police,
and is brought back to the bishop’s house.

What does the bishop do? He tells the police that the silver was a gift, and then adds his good candlesticks to the load, “chastising” Valjean for not remembering to take them the first time.

In the movie version of this scene, just before Jean Valjean departs, the bishop says to him:

“Don’t ever forget: you’ve promised to become someone new.”

It’s judgment, of course.

But it’s held in a much larger container of connection and belonging and grace.

Now, *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean—it’s an imaginary story. But yours is not an imaginary story.

Do you have anyone in your life who is tying you up in knots right now? And no matter how hard you try, you just can’t help passing judgment on that person?

The next time you’re with them, or about to speak to them,
pause, take a breath, and remember:

In Jesus Christ, you promised to become someone new.

Amen.