

Sermon

July 3, 2016 | The 7th Sunday after Pentecost
Text: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20 | Preacher: Brenda Kilpatrick

I was recently told, by someone who does not know me well, that I hold a naïve worldview. This struck me as amusing, since I know myself to have at least some cynicism within me. See, I have an older sister. She is 8 years older than me. Some might describe her as hyper-religious. During our youth, she reported having seen an angel (and is still adamant about this to this day). As a young adult, she reported having a demon sit on her chest and try to kill her. She believes, quite literally, in the things she reads in the bible. Her faith is almost legendary within our family, as she once fasted for 30 days (ingesting nothing but water), and believes in praying for hours; loudly, and in tongues. My sister and I find ourselves at opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to religious beliefs, with her being far to the right and me quite some distance to the left. If either of us is naïve, in my opinion it is probably her.

So, where does my cynicism come in? Where doesn't it might be a better question. One of my sister's pastimes is viewing televangelism. She watches these shows, and often, is sure that they are speaking directly to her. Just recently, she was watching the 700 Club when one of the hosts said, "Someone has a migraine and I am going to pray right now that the Lord will bring healing." My sister thought, "I have a migraine!" So, she put her hand on the television while they prayed and her headache went away.

This may be a lovely story. However, I got stuck on the "someone has a migraine." It is estimated that approximately 38 million people in the U.S. suffer from migraines (migraineresearchfoundation.org). It seemed to me that probably a lot of someones in their audience suffered from migraines. However, my sister was sure that they were talking to her. She was so excited at her outcome that she called to let them know that their prayer brought her

deliverance. They told her that they will have her testify about this on their show.

Sometimes I teach a theories of personality class. This whole experience reminded me of teaching my students about the "Barnum Effect," so-named after P.T. Barnum (of carnival fame) who is reported to have said, "there is a sucker born every minute." With respect to descriptions of personality, the Barnum Effect refers to descriptions that are so vague and general, they could apply to anyone. To illustrate this, I give students a very general description of personality. They think they are all getting different ones. That is not true; yet, most of them are amazed at the accuracy of the description.

I also recall times when my sister was unemployed and unable to make ends meet. But, she faithfully sent money to a televangelist who sent "blessed" pieces of material in return (very small, at that) and promised that God would reward her faithfulness with incredible blessings. She looked for these faithfully every day, but nothing out of the ordinary ever happened. For my part, I wondered how these "Christians" could take advantage of people like that. I also wondered when my sister would wake up to this. I found myself drifting further left, perhaps to counter or balance out my sister's vision of Christianity.

You might think that conversations between us would be difficult. However, they are not. We both confess Christianity, so we have many common beliefs and values. We have interesting conversations. My sister was one of the first family members to whom I came out. It has been interesting to see her shift in her feelings and beliefs about LGBT individuals.

While sometimes my sister tries to see things through my eyes, occasionally I try to see things through hers. Today's gospel allows an example of this. The words, "Whoever

listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you, rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me" are kind of scary words to me. I sometimes try to put myself in this story, wondering how I would react if two people showed up to my house with the message that the kingdom of God has come near to me. Would I politely decline their offer, as I do when two Jehovah's Witnesses show up at my door? You know, "Thank you for stopping by, but, no thank you." What if they were representatives of Jesus and I did not recognize them as such?

Have you ever found yourself wondering whether you would recognize Jesus if he returned? Perhaps, (as I do occasionally) you sometimes look into the eyes of a homeless person and wonder if she is an angel in disguise? Ok. Maybe it's the influence of my sisters' faith, or my own naïveté, but, sometimes I do wonder about these things.

And, putting aside the issues of whether Jesus is truly coming back or whether angels find time to show up in various disguises (perhaps like Arya in "Game of Thrones"), I think this practice of mine is a good one. At the heart of it is a question of how Jesus might find me. Would he recognize me as one of his own? Or, would I be surprised to find that I have somehow unknowingly rejected him?

Perhaps I do have a naïve worldview after all. Especially if being naïve means longing for worldwide peace. Or, desiring people to be able to talk about difference, both ideological and religious, without conversations leading to separation, violence, and death. We live in a diverse world, but ultimately, we share humanity. It is difficult to understand how this point gets lost so easily.

If we state Jesus' words in the positive, we are being told that not only do we have to accept Jesus and the Father, but we

also have to accept anyone they send. Well, here's a problem, particularly for us in today's world; how do we know for certain who has been sent to us by our Savior? By requiring this, is Jesus simply underscoring our need to love and do good to all?

Jesus understood that throughout history and, particularly at this moment in history, we would need to be reminded of the importance of loving and accepting one another. Failure to learn to navigate our differences can and does lead to senseless loss of lives, as we have seen most recently in the attacks in Orlando and Istanbul. MLK, Jr is often quoted as having said, "Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that (www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com)." I hope that I am not naïve in hoping and praying that this is true. Let us not grow weary in doing what is right.