

“Me First”

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Scriptures: Numbers 11:4–6, 10–17, 24–29; Psalm 19; James 4:7–5:6; Mark 9:38–48

In our Gospel story last week, we had a stark contrast between the disciples, who were arguing with one another as they traveled with Jesus about which one of them was greater than the other, and the child that Jesus brings before them, the one who is last in the eyes of all, the one whom Jesus says we must sever in order to be truly great. We have missed the point of the kingdom, we have not heeded its wisdom, when we focus on ourselves first, when we insist on our own way. Those who would become first must become last. This is the way of the kingdom.

But is there ever a time when we should think of ourselves before we think about others? Is there a time when it is the wise thing to say “me first?” Our Gospel passage for today tells us that the answer is yes. When it comes to offering correction, judging motives, and discerning areas where growth is needed, it is wise to begin first with ourselves. This kingdom principle is clearly laid out in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, in his teaching on removing the log from our own eye before we address the speck in our brother’s eye.

And I want us to think, as we have a few times in the past couple of weeks, of this work of self-evaluation, self-judgment, and even self-criticism, not in terms of condemnation, but in terms of health. Telling other people that they need to exercise and eat more vegetables doesn’t help us to get any more physically fit. In the same

way, self-assessment is always the first sort of assessment we should make when seeking to be spiritually healthy.

But it seems to me like we just want to be all up in other people's business instead. It is more fun to talk and think about other people's problems and try to solve them, than it is to face our own weaknesses, sins, and shortcomings. As it turns out, it has always been this way.

There is a pattern in the Gospel that illustrates this principle. A person or group of persons approaches Jesus and asks a question that reveals they are worried more so about someone else's obedience, fate, or status before God than they are about their own. Jesus comes back with the principle of returning to focusing on the self in terms of greater faithfulness. I want to offer a few examples, one from each Gospel and then ending with our reading today.

First up, in Luke's gospel, the 13th chapter, an unnamed person asks Jesus about how many people will be saved. This is a fair question we have probably always wondered. Who gets to go to heaven and who goes to hell? We play the game with historical figures and with people who are alive; we understand the impulse. But note how Jesus cautions against such questions. "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able."¹ Did you catch what happened there? "I want to know who is saved and who is not, Jesus." What is his reply? "Entering through the narrow gate is hard. Make sure you do so." Jesus reminds us that instead of obsessing over the fate of others, we must first be clear that our own path is walking in the way of faithfulness. Don't worry about them. Focus on yourself.

¹ Luke 13:24

Next we have Matthew 20:1-16, the parable of the workers in the vineyard. You have likely heard it before so I will keep the summary brief. An owner hires laborers to work in his vineyard. He agrees with the ones he hires for the whole day to pay them a day's wages, but also hires others throughout the day, even to the point where he hires some workers who only work an hour. When it comes time to pay the workers, those who only worked an hour get a whole day's wages. Those who have worked the whole day are excited at first because they think they are going to get even more, but their attitude turns sour when they receive what they had been promised and nothing more. They are focused on what others received and so they look down upon the wages they had happily accepted earlier. The owner rebukes them for looking down on his generosity and questions why they are not happy to receive what they agreed to earlier the same day. Don't worry about them... focus on yourself.

In John's gospel, there is an interesting little exchange between Jesus and Peter in chapter 21. In the moments after Jesus forgives Peter for his denial, Jesus shares with him that he will be martyred for the faith. Apparently John is standing nearby, because Peter asks about his fate as well, perhaps trying to seek comfort in the understanding that he will not be the only one who is fated to suffer for the sake of the kingdom. And what is Jesus' reply: "What is that to you? You follow me." Don't worry about him, focus on yourself.

That brings us to our gospel reading for today from Mark 9. The disciples are concerned about someone else casting out demons in Jesus' name, so much so that they tried to stop him from doing so. Notice what Jesus does. He doesn't seem too concerned about this freelancing demon caster-outer. And he switches the conversation from monitoring the activity and fruit of others to looking back towards

the self . He says that the one who is not against us is for us and that those who even offer a cup of water in the service of the kingdom will not lose their reward.

But then come the hard words. Lead others astray? Dire consequences. Your hand, your foot, your eye is causing you to sin? It would be better for you if you cut it off. Worry less about those doing work in my name that you aren't so sure about, Jesus says, worry more about your own feet and hands and eyes, lest they lead you into judgment.

So there is the principle over and over throughout the Gospels, the move from the critical focus on others to the addressing of our own sins, the things we need to cut out. So what are the sorts of things that we ought to cut out of our lives?

Here we move to our reading from the book of James. Our reading highlights three attitudes that will lead us to destruction if they are not removed.

The first is a further reflection on this theme of judgment. Just like the disciples who were eager to judge others and not themselves, James' audience seems to have the same issue: "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

How often do we get ourselves into trouble when we presumptuously judge others? Not only can our judgment be wrong, but more importantly it can become our excuse to avoid our own shortcomings.

I think this is especially evident in our politics. Yes I'm going to go there for a minute, pray for me. I don't think you will find many people who will say they think the state of our politics is healthy. We've all seen the videos comparing debates from the past with debates today. What happened? I am not qualified or authorized to give us a complete answer to that question, but I will say that part of the blame lies in our inability to critique our own political side while we severely judge the other side. As Christians, our faith and ethics are not going to line up completely with any political organization. We therefore have the responsibility as Christians to call a spade a spade and to critique our side when it deserves critique. The toxicity of our political discourse is due in large part to the mentality that if I am supporting a particular candidate or platform, I cannot offer any critique. Idols want our all or nothing. As Christians, we can't offer our all to any other than God, and so the support we render must come with our critiques. Okay, rabbit trail over.

Judging others feels easy and more safe. It pushes down the voice inside that reminds us of how we need to change. If we want to walk in the kingdom way, our judgment must come first for ourselves.

Next, James discusses an attitude that is the fruit of an idolatry of our own destiny. "I'm going to do this and that, and that." James says this is boasting. In speaking that way, we have forgotten that our futures are totally dependent on the will of God. He provides the opportunities, the resources, the very fact that we wake up every morning.

To constantly live in a state of focusing on what's next, we miss the here and now, we miss the opportunities God gives us to be faithful moment to moment. When I am solely focused on my plans for the future, I'm more liable to miss God's plans for me here and now.

Finally, James tackles the idol of wealth. Echoing the sermon on the mount, James points out the fleeting nature of material wealth. Going further, he makes the connection between the amassing of material wealth and the suffering of others by mentioning the stolen wages of the workers of the field. This highlights an important truth about the idolatry of material possessions - not only is it harmful to the one who idolizes, it destroys those whose lives are commodified in the process of accumulation. If his letter were to be written today, would he mention the children who make our smartphones and sew our clothes? Consumerism and the worship of wealth aren't just destructive because of what they do to those who partake, but because of the vulnerable ones they crush.

Judgment, future plans, and wealth. At first glance, at least for me, this is a bit of a disjointed list. Sure all of these things can go bad, but why list them here together? Notice how each of these vices - judging others, relying on our own plans, and idolizing wealth - notice how they all relate to our desire for security.

I'll dig in a little bit more - when we judge others and not ourselves, we are setting up a system of reassurance that we are the good ones and it's those we are judging who are the bad ones. When we are the ones with all the answers, we make "straight A-s." This is a form of self-derived moral security. It is the prayer of the Pharisee thanking God that he is not like the tax collector.

Relying on our own plans makes the future, something that is unknown to us, a fixed and stable entity. If I orchestrate every second of my future down to the tiniest detail, surely nothing will go wrong and I will have control over my environment. I will have security. I will have stability.

The idolatry of wealth is so enticing in part because of the stability and security that material things can bring. We need shelter. We need food. We need healthcare. These are things that we have to pay for. If we have enough wealth, then those things do not become a worry, so the amassing of wealth becomes an exercise in chasing security, no matter how many times the finish line gets moved down the road.

And that is the thing about our desire for security - if we are not seeking it from God first, it will never go away. It will be like that fire and worm Jesus describes in the garbage heap of Gehenna that sits outside Jerusalem, it will not die. When you chase security that is dependent on yourself, no amount will be enough. And just as Jesus warns about hands, feet, and eyes that lead us astray, the end of that search leads to death, both in the eternal sense and in bringing hell on earth - for ourselves and the ones we step on in our search for security in whatever form we can find it. How many wars have been waged in the search for security? How many families broken? How many lives ruined? Don't fall for false security. That way is death.

The people in the desert thought they should go back and submit themselves again to literal slavery all for a little variety in their diet. "Yes we were slaves back there, but at least we ate well." They were not content with the bread from heaven, the provision of God, and that blindness led them to desire their own destruction. God in his mercy spared them from that fate, but it would be their children who would come to his Promised Land because they could not see past their own stomachs. Don't make that mistake.

Jesus offers us the polar opposite of body mutilation today, he offers life, wholeness, and healing. But to pursue healing, we have to take inventory of those things that are harming us, and we need to be ready, with God's help, to separate ourselves from them.

Our collect for the day is a collect those of you who pray Morning or Evening Prayer will recognize. It is the collect we say after we confess our sins. This is the security that we need: "Grant to your people, merciful Lord, pardon and peace, that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind." There is a security worth chasing. Repentance. Mercy. Forgiveness.