

11/22/2020 Sermon- When did we see you hungry, God? Reverend Heidi Champagne

In our reading today from Matthew, we hear this parable of the sheep and the goats--this cosmic separation of the "good" from the "bad" that the writer of Matthew seems enamored with. I have read this passage countless times, and am struck by something different each time. This time, I was struck by the examples of "seeing" or "witnessing" one another. "When did we see you hungry?" When did we see you thirsty? When did we see you sick or in prison? When did we see you as a stranger that we welcomed into our midst? When did we see you? When did we see?

In the times we are living in, when and where do we see God? Where are we witness to the face of God in the hungry and the voice of God in the hurting?

Have you heard the expression "hurt people hurt people?" I did a little research this week on the origin of the phrase, because I wanted to attribute it to the correct person--but, alas, it has been attributed to everyone from Rick Warren to Oprah Winfrey. So I cannot attribute it properly. But I can and will reference it. Hurt people hurt people. So simple, and yet I wonder if understanding this phrase it is at the very root of our call to love one another?

Hurt people hurt people. When she was just 3, our daughter Nichol went from living in a flurry of foster homes to settling in with John and his late wife, Melissa. John and Melissa were experienced foster parents by this point, and knew just how to help this little girl to stabilize. The next years were rocky, and culminated in Melissa's cancer diagnosis and death--an unspeakable loss for John, and a hurt too big to navigate for the five children in his care who had already experienced so much loss in their lives.

When I met Nichol, she was 7. She was rough and tumbly, and it was sometimes hard to see past that to the love and light at her core. She told me when John and I first started dating that she wanted me to be her mom.

A little more than a year later, John and I did get married and blended our families.

My boys were little then, a kindergartener and a two and a half year old. I had no experience with teenagers, or even 8 year olds. I learned fast.

Nichol was a smart kid who excelled academically, but had behavioral challenges. Specifically, she regularly got in trouble for beating up a boy who bullied her--on the bus, on the playground, and, finally, one day in the hall at school. The last one earned her a suspension. When John and I met with teachers, we were told that, frankly, the boy had it coming to him and they wished Nichol didn't have to be punished. The boy had zeroed in on her bi-racial heritage and called her a "half breed." He had insulted both her birth mother and Melissa. He had outed Nichol before she had come out, using the most derogatory of terms. He had whittled away at everything in her that he saw as "different", until she could take no more. She could no longer hold back the hurt that he stirred up in her. Hurt people hurt people.

Our hearts ached for her experience, and the way this boy had treated her was far from ok. ..yet we asked her to consider what was hurting him so badly that he felt the need to act like this. His home life was unstable. It was likely that violence was part of his daily experience. The only way that he gained status or recognition was to call out what he perceived as weakness in others. hurt people hurt people.

Understanding this didn't diffuse the situation, but it gave her the tools necessary to thrive. It gave her the ability to truly see- ---beyond her own hurt to the woundedness of others.

Nichol got past that experience and excelled through high school. At just 28, she and her girlfriend are homeowners. They have given us the sweetest grand dog.

Last weekend, Nichol called John, angry and upset that a neighbor had come to their yard, throwing plastic furniture that had blown into his yard and screaming at her about the shed she had put up on the property line and the fence that challenged property boundaries. She couldn't get a word in edgewise, the man was so angry. Sadly, they are neighbors and this was the first interaction they'd had.

John gave her an answer similar to the one he had given when she had beat up that boy. What was hurting her neighbor? What was under all that anger? He suggested that she attempt to see the man and write him a letter of apology and tell him she would like to get on better footing with him.

Nichol texted later in the day. She had brought the man her letter and it had opened up a conversation which enabled her to see him. He is a Mashpee Wampanoag. Not only was his tribe kicked off their land, but his family once owned the parcel of land that Nichol and Katherine are living on. Over the years, different neighbors have encroached on the property lines and each act of encroachment has been a painful reminder of the larger injustice. He is filled with anger fueled by a history of mistreatment and colonization, and Nichol's shed and fence and blowing plastic furniture felt to him like the latest iterations of a long standing problem. He was angry and hurt. And hurt people hurt people. Nichol was able to hear him, to tell him she agrees with him, and to even share the fact that she is not as "white" as she appears, that she too has known intolerance and injustice.

By the end of their conversation, she had asked him where he kept his snow blower, as he has a long driveway and is in his 70's and she didn't want him and his wife out there trying to clear snow in the dead of winter. These neighbors, who had not previously met face to face, were able to see one another.

For me this is the kind of very real, gut punching prompt that the scripture offers us today. Where in our lives are we blind to the pain of others? Who do we see? When people act aggressively toward us, or when we feel we have been treated unfairly, are we able to go deeper and question what is hurting them?

And when we feel wounded, are we able to breathe into the hurt and resist the urge or the reflex to strike out in pain?

What if we could get to the place of understanding before we jump to conclusions? We as humans, with God's help, have the ability to extend apologies, to ask others where it hurts, to be neighbors and to truly see one another. We have the ability, with God's help, to recognize God in the faces of those who hunger for food as well as those who hunger for understanding.

My prayer as we enter this season of gratitude is that each of us can look around us and see God not only in the places of harmony, but in the chaos and pain and longing and conflict. I pray that we in all of our humanity can search out the hurt in others and work with God to write the letters of apology, to ask the questions, to make the overtures, to offer to clear one another's driveways. Hurt people hurt people. But loved people, love people, and love always wins. Amen.