

We've just heard a very popular Bible passage – the story of the sheep and the goats. It's a good one! It's one that often resonates with us because the message seems like a simple one – be a sheep, not a goat! The sheep care for others and look out for “the least of these” and in doing so, it is as though they are caring for Christ himself. The goats? Not so much. The goats do nothing, and, in doing so, they pass up on the opportunity to meet Christ again and again. Sounds good, but not so easy in practice.

We often hear this story as an illustration of what is called “the last judgement” – which implies that the point of this story is about what happens to us after we die, or when Jesus returns. But this vivid story comes at the end of a long monologue that Jesus presents to his disciples – just before he tells them that he will soon die. So it's a kind of farewell speech, and so I think that Jesus is more concerned with how the disciples should LIVE.

The same is true for us. This is a story about how to live now. Right now. And in the book that we're enjoying this summer, **An Altar in the World**, Barbara Brown Taylor calls this “The Practice of Encountering Others.”¹

If we hold today's Bible story in one hand and the “Practice of Encountering Others” in the other, we might leave here with some guidance for how to live right now. For starters, when we're in a position to provide food or drink...clothing or comfort...to help those who are considered “the least of these,” we can do so.

And yet, despite the fact that poverty and injustice is so pervasive in our world, this interpretation is – dare I say it? – too easy. Brown Taylor describes encountering others in this way:

¹ An Altar in the World. Chapter 6.

“The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self—to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.”²

Think, for a second, about how difficult this is. The spiritual practice we’re talking about today – encountering others – isn’t just about supporting good causes, or being kind, or looking out for the little guy (although these are essential to the plan). It’s about encountering others, Brown Taylor tells us, because they are a gift to us.

This is hard stuff! First, it’s hard because, sometimes, when we set out to help others, we are quite convinced that WE are the gift. I know I’m guilty of this. It’s easy to give money or to buy stuff to donate when I believe I’m the savior and I get to give on my terms. But that still leaves me viewing the “other” as a recipient of my charity rather than a child of God.

Second, it’s hard because the “other” means EVERYONE! Seriously? I can assure you, Jesus, that the cranky driver yakking on his cell phone with one hand and giving me the finger with the other is not a gift! Uh, Lord? That mean-girl-mom at my kids’ school who scoffed at my scraggly yoga pants? She is a gift I can live without.

So why? Why does Jesus ask us to do something so hard...so seemingly impossible? Well, because one of the most radical things we can possibly do is to encounter the “Other” – and then see the face of God, reflected in them.

This idea was radical in Jesus’ time. It was one of the reasons that some people didn’t like Jesus very much. They preferred clear rules to define who was in and who was out. They preferred to think that wealth and prestige was a sign of God’s favor. The idea that God might not just tolerate the poor as objects of charity....but that God might LOVE the poor so much that they

² Ibid, page 93.

would be the ones with a special place in the kingdom of heaven? This kind of radical acceptance that Jesus shared and lived was a threat.

It's radical now, too, isn't it? There aren't a lot of prominent figures encouraging us to demonstrate this kind of love OR this worldview. These days, it seems like we gain points for our ability to destroy and undermine others. I get that – there are politicians and bloggers and neighbors and yes, sometimes even family members whose points of view are repugnant to us. And so we outdo one another trying to find the wittiest and most cutting way to slam them. We try to top each other in our ability to de-humanize the “other.” And when we can't do it in person, we e-mail or blog or post.

But that doesn't work. And it doesn't work because it's completely out of whack with the world that God created and gave to us. As Bible scholar NT Wright says, “(Justice) means bringing the world back into balance. Central to the Jewish and Christian traditions is the belief that this passionate longing for justice comes from the Creator God.³” And so Jesus essentially says to his disciples – if you love ME, and if you love GOD, then you have to love EVERYONE. Otherwise your love isn't real and true and meaningful.

So, you might be thinking, but what do I do? Many of us are already supporting mission partners and other organizations – with our time and our money – that helping the “least of these.” Please, keep it up! But if we remember Brown Taylor's challenge, this is about recognizing the full humanity of others AND to experience them as a genuine gift.

And this isn't a theoretical discussion – we're talking about how we behave each day – so I want to share some really practical ideas. And to illustrate them, I'm going to share some more stories about – yes – me. Sorry! It's kind of ironic because one of my illustrations is about my own inability to shut up and listen. But I learn – and I realize how much richer the days are when I am fully present.

³ **Matthew for Everyone, Part 2.** NT Wright. Westminster John Knox Press, page 141.

So for our first idea: encounter strangers. And when you do, pay attention.

A number of years ago, a group of parents from my children's school took a cooking class together as a fun evening of team-building, food, and wine.

There was a woman there whose job was to wash all the dishes we created. Her name was Elsa. I remember this because I had to hand her sharp knives to wash and, in the interest of safety, I had to let her know they were coming. So I asked her name, and then we chatted for a bit. Throughout the evening, I interacted with her here and there – stopping to chat each time I swooped in with more dishes, learning a little bit about her. I certainly can't pretend that we became BFFs, but I tried to make her thankless task a little less burdensome. I didn't, however, do anything extraordinary. So I was taken aback when, at the end of the evening, she said, "thank you –you're the nicest person I've met in a long time!"

I tell this story not because I think I was actually the "nicest person" but because it was ridiculously easy to earn this moniker. It made me think that Elsa probably didn't encounter many nice people in her line of work. In fact, I think I was the only one in our group who paid any attention to our dishwasher. At the end of the evening, when our organizer started to collect cash from to tip the chef, I asked, "what about Elsa?" She responded, "who?"

"Elsa. The dishwasher?"

The organizer looked at me blankly.

Here's the thing – in the big scheme of the world's injustices, this is a pretty small one. But 16 adults – people who I would consider to be genuinely kind and caring – spent an evening in the close quarters of a kitchen and never noticed the woman cleaning up after us. People are put into our path every day – we can choose to walk around them or cross over them? OR we can choose to acknowledge them, experience their presence as a gift, and look for ways to be a blessing to them as well.

Second, encounter the real “other.” People unlike you – those who don’t see the world the same way you do or who have radically different life experiences. And then shut up and listen.

I’ll never forget the first trans-gender man I met. He is the husband of a good friend and I was eager to make him feel comfortable at our dinner table. So eager, in fact, that when we sat down together, I made a huge point of letting him know that this was a safe space...telling stories that I hoped would demonstrate that we were open and respectful and loving and all that good stuff. I babbled on and on, as though it was all about me. He listened patiently. When I finally let him, he started to gently share his experiences.

Oh my goodness, I realized. Here is a man who grew up as a girl and then, as an adult, had to figure out how to navigate the world as a man. I can’t even fathom that-but I have a rare opportunity to hear this story. I heard the confusion of not fitting in, not ever, as a child or youth...the deep and abiding pain of being rejected by his Christian parents...the frustrations of court battles to receive basic documents needed to do the things we take for granted, such as get on an airplane or drive a car.

I am so grateful that I listened. It changed my life. It took a complicated social issue from the theoretical to the real, simply because I listened to his story.

Do we have to agree just because we listen? No. It may be that the story I have just shared with you makes you furious – if that’s the case, then I thank you for listening respectfully. I think that we would be in a much better place today as a nation – as a world – if we listened to each other’s stories and personal experiences. I know I would be a better human if I could.

Finally, withhold judgement. To be clear, that doesn’t mean that we have to tolerate everything. When we meet people who are overtly racist or sexist, or just plain mean, we can say something firm but kind. We can walk away. When we encounter people who are abusive, we can – and should – get away.

But when we encounter those who simply make different choices or who see the world differently, can we give them the benefit of the doubt?

Brene Brown has a stunning example of this in her latest book. While speaking at a conference, she was asked to share a hotel room with a stranger. The stranger repulsed her – the woman was messy, foul mouthed, and utterly oblivious to the distress she was causing her roommate. As Brown rehashed this story with friend after friend, her self-righteous indignation grew. Finally, her therapist suggested – “is it possible that this woman was doing the best she could?”⁴

At first, Brene Brown was annoyed by this– of course the woman could do better! Her behavior was thoroughly unacceptable! But as she considered it, Brown realized that she had attributed all kinds of “stuff” to this woman without knowing anything about her. AND, Brown was even seeing the woman’s behavior as a direct and personal attack...the roommate’s way of judging Brown for being organized and tidy.

How often do we do the same?

“That other driver thinks that her time is more important than ours – that’s why she can’t abide by the speed limit.”

“Ugh – this guy in the movie theatre is talking just to annoy me.”

“Why is that person at work deliberately flaunting the dress code? Do they think that the rules just don’t apply to them?”

We might not agree with the things that others say and do – and sometimes we shouldn’t. But if we ask, “what if this person is simply doing the best they can?” perhaps we will find more productive ways to encounter each other.

⁴ Rising Strong. 2015.

I've talked a lot about encountering the stranger -- but what about our nearest and dearest?

By all means, let's be fully present to them, too. What would it look like to give our full and undivided attention to family and dear friends? When we see our kids or our friends all the time – or when we've been with a spouse year after year, we can easily take them for granted. If we're normally distracted by our smart phone, our chores, our professional work – let's create time each day or week that we put those aside and focus all of our emotional energy on the ones we love!

I like to spend on-on-one time with each of my children right before bed – a lot of parents do. One of my sons once said, "I'm on to you mom. You wait til I'm ready for bed and then you sit down and ask me things so that I'll tell you all my secrets." You know what? He's right. And the beauty is that it still works! Despite my lack of subtlety, he wants to talk, and he needs my full and undivided attention to make it happen.

Remember what Barbara Brown Taylor says – one of the gifts of encountering the other is that they draw us out of ourselves and our own narrow worlds. They draw us into fuller lives – lives that we desperately crave, even if we don't realize it. And, perhaps most importantly, they draw us into the fullness of life that God intends for us – and for ALL God's children. AMEN.