

God Can See the Good in You

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The Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Exodus 3:1 – 15
Matthew 16:21 – 28

Text: But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” – Exodus 3:11

About a month ago I was reading the PD as I was eating my breakfast on a Saturday morning (a ritual I still like to do even though I have to read an electronic edition 3 times a week). As I was reading through the Saturday paper edition, I read a Forum article entitled “Preschool has suspended my son five times: he’s 3.” As I was reading the article, I learned that there was also a second son about a year older who had the same suspension problems at the preschool. The boys’ names were JJ and Joah. As it turns out the mother (Tunette Powell) had the same problems in school (different school) when she was a kid – she was also expelled from preschool and went on to serve many more suspensions during her academic career. Knowing her history, she promised herself that when she would have children, she would not let her negative school experiences affect them. Mrs. Powell believed her experience was isolated. She searched for excuses. Maybe she was just a bad kid. Maybe it had something to do with her father’s incarceration, which forced her mother to raise her and her brothers alone.

So Mrs. Powell punished the kids at home for the bad behavior in the preschool. Curiously though, Mrs. Powell says in the article that the kids don’t cause much trouble at home or with baby sitters. And there appears to be a good father involved. Still Mrs. Powell blamed herself, and her past, for the trouble her sons were having in preschool. She continued to blame herself until she had taken the boys to a birthday party for one of the classmates.

This is where the article got interesting. As mothers chit-chat while kids play, the discussion came around to the subject of how the kids misbehaved and how they got disciplined at the preschool. As they talked Mrs. Powell confessed about the many suspensions her boys, JJ and Joah, were having. One of the other mothers who was listening expressed complete surprise about the suspensions, because she thought the boys, JJ and Joah, were nice kids. Then one after another, white mothers confessed the trouble their children had gotten into. Some of the behavior was similar to that of JJ and Joah, but some was much worse.

Here’s the startling point: None of the white children had been suspended. It seemed that the worse thing the school did was phone the white mothers.

After the party, Mrs. Powell read a study reflecting everything she was living. Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment but make up 48% of preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension.

Mrs. Powell immediately thought back to her own childhood. She thought of the humiliating labels that greeted her before she could read. She thought back to the number of black friends and family members who also were suspended and expelled. She thought about family and friends who never overcame the detrimental effects of being suspended from preschool and did not want that for her two sons, JJ and Joah. She did not want this for any child, white or black.

So she got more involved and learned more. She learned that the problem is not that we have a bunch of racist teachers and administrators. Most educators want to help all children. But many aren't aware of the biases that they like all of us, harbor.

This reminds me of the Jonathan Haidt adult study we did here at Faith UCC a little over a year ago, where it was also shown that we all have xenophobic tendencies that we need to be aware of – and understand how to control.

Mrs. Powell learned from a recent study published by the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology that the subjects – mostly white, female undergraduates – viewed black boys as older and less innocent than their white peers.

This is almost where I stopped reading the article. Not a cheery article. It was a sunny Saturday and I was looking forward to working in my daylily garden after I finished my breakfast. Why spend some time reading another bad kid story?

So, where am I going with this? Is there a spiritual message? Well let me give it a try. Do you remember our Exodus story from this morning? This is where Moses was at the burning bush and God was asking Moses to deliver the suffering people who are in Egypt. But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Moses had his doubts about his abilities. And he had good reason. We all remember the good things about Moses, right? I know that I do. But what about the "bad" things that Moses has done? Do any of you remember the bad things? How many of you remember that Moses was a murderer? A murderer? Somehow this murderer story doesn't see much light of day.

In the previous Exodus chapter, chapter 2, we saw that Moses grew up as an adopted child in the household of the Pharaoh. One day, Moses went out to see his Hebrew kinsfolk and saw their forced labor. At that time, Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, perhaps because the Hebrew wasn't working hard enough. What did Moses do? Well he didn't just sit idle. No, Moses made sure no one was looking, and he rose up and killed the Egyptian and buried the Egyptian body in the sand. Then, then, the day after Moses killed the Egyptian (we're still in Exodus Chapter 2), Moses ran across a couple of his Hebrew kinsfolk who were fighting. When Moses tried to interject himself, one Hebrew made the "startling" comment to Moses, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" So before Moses had his time with God at the burning bush, Moses was a murderer and had a "reputation" as a murderer. I guess Moses had every

right to feel like he was unworthy when God came to ask him to deliver the Israelites at the burning bush.

But what about those of us who have a “reputation” for being bad and that “reputation” is simply pasted on our back because there is something “different” about us.

Something different about how we look.

Something different about our race.

Something different about our gender.

Something different about our sexual orientation.

Something different about an affliction we have.

Let’s look at the Matthew passage from this morning, where Jesus said to the disciple, Peter, and I quote, “Get behind me Satan!” Now Jesus said more than that to explain himself, but how many of you listening to me this morning had someone dear to you, sometime in your life, say something like “Get behind me Satan,” or maybe something even worse. When that happens to you, it’s almost enough to give a person an inferiority complex. It’s part of our human condition that we (me and you), we can never quite stop this pre-judging thing, and we can never stop taking it “hard” when someone pre-judges us. Just when we think we are getting better, we find ourselves quick to judge again, or we get down on ourselves for what someone says to us. So this is something that we have to work on all our life.

Before I let us dwell too much on the negative, let me turn our minds back just a few verses to Matthew Chapter 16, verses 17 and 18 (not part of today’s reading), where Jesus was giving Peter feedback about the good, the good he saw in him. Jesus said to Peter, and I quote, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven (has). And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Jesus could see that Peter had the power to teach and show others the Way and Jesus was empowering him to do so. Wow, that’s a commencement speech!

So as you leave here today, remember that God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are different. God can see the good in everyone. God gives, freely, unconditional love to all. God gives, freely, mercy to all. God gives, freely, grace to all. God can see the good in you!

So no matter where you are in your life, first, allow the voice of God to enter, and allow yourself to see the good in you. Allow yourself to do this and it allows you, in turn, to see the good in others. Moses allowed this, Peter allowed this – and look at the goodness that followed. Mrs. Powell allowed this and she is now helping her sons, JJ and Joah, and others as well, through the non-profit organization she co-founded.

God is good. I say God is good. (response: “all the time”) And that’s so SHE can see the good in YOU all the time! Amen.