

On Being Different

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Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6; Luke 13:1-9

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” --
Isaiah 55:8

One of you gave me a cartoon a while back that I have taped to my study door here at church. It shows two men, arm-in-arm, saying to a minister, “We want to be married. . . .” The minister's rather cynical response is: “Aim higher.”

There's something to be said for advising people of whatever affectional preference to aim higher than what we call ordinary coupledness. Anyone who's spent much time counseling people learns fairly quickly that ordinary often isn't pretty. There's a lot of what one of my colleagues back at Harvard liked to call “ordinary, everyday unhappiness,” and much of that unhappiness comes from our relationships, as every therapist knows. Aim higher.

That, in essence, is what God, through the prophet Isaiah, was urging the Israelites in our first lesson: aim higher.

“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,” God asks the hardworking Israelites, “and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” Why do you keep buying the same old junk food, physical and spiritual, that everyone else is buying? Why are you struggling for the things that will make you look like everyone else? Why are you mindlessly following the crowd? Aim higher.

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

That's the bull's-eye to which God urges the chosen people to aim. Water freely available, nourishment in abundance, and it's all free. It doesn't cost anything. No down payment, no finance charges, no hidden costs. It's free, totally and absolutely free for those who want. Come to the waters, everyone who thirsts, and drink. That's God's invitation.

It's certainly not ours. We, of course, would say come to the water division office and pay your water bill. You drank – or bathed or washed or flushed – so now you need to pay. You have to pay for the water intake system that sits out in Lake Erie, and you have to pay for the pumping stations that keep the pressure high enough to get the water to your upstairs shower, and you have to pay for the aging sewer system that carries the waste water back to Lake Erie via the waste treatment plant. There's no coming to the water in our town unless you can pay for it. That's the way we handle one of God's most precious resources around here, and that's the way it's handled pretty much every place where humans organize themselves into water delivery systems, or food delivery systems or safety delivery systems or anything else requiring human labor: you have to pay. In our world, there's not only no free lunch; there's no free anything.

Aim higher. That's the word of the Lord to the prophet Isaiah and to us. Aim for a way of life that isn't run by the human abstract system that we call money, a system that has alienated us more and more from the reality of human labor. Have you looked at the

compensation packages of CEOs lately? Most of us still come by our money the old-fashioned way – we have to earn it. But somewhere along the line corporate culture persuaded the rest of us that there were “intangibles” not related to actual work or productivity for which executives deserved compensation, so that by 2005, the average CEO earned 815 times what a full-time worker paid minimum wage earned. Tell me how anyone can work 815 times harder than someone else. Ask Nancy or Ed Jacquet or Barb or Dave Holtz or Jill Dugovics or Denise Reynolds or Anne Marie Dorey or Doris Becka how hard they work and see if they'll agree that the average CEO works not just harder or longer hours than they do, but hundreds of times harder or hundreds of thousands of hours longer. There aren't that many hours in the day or energy in the human frame. Our system of recognizing and compensating people for the work they actually do – work that actually produces something, that helps make the life we share together on this planet better, as opposed to the outrageous handouts the rich and powerful say they deserve because of the so-called “risks” they take when they make decisions – decisions, by the way, that regularly drive businesses and whole industries into the ground and deprive working people of jobs – that system is broken and it doesn't need fixing – it needs replacing.

Aim higher. God's ways are not our ways. “You that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” Sounds like communism to me. Or socialism. Or some other -ism that scares us senseless.

In God's economy, you get what you need, no questions asked. You don't get to hoard resources and call it capital; that's our way. Get rich quick schemes – those are our thoughts. Devising ways to charge the same amount for smaller packages – those are our ways and we call it business as usual.

We are not called, you and I who call ourselves Christian, to participate in business as usual. We are called to be different. We are called to work night and day, all the time, in every area of our existence, no exceptions, to help create a world that more nearly approximates that way of life called God's realm.

“You that have no money, come, buy and eat!” That's not business as usual. It's the way God does business. It's God's economy. It's God's stimulus package. It's the beauty and bounty of the earth as God gave them to us – freely and without charge, available to everyone who needs. We are the ones who fenced in and roped off and laid claim to and fight and kill to defend our right to exploit for our advantage what God freely gives. Our thoughts are most definitely not God's thoughts and our ways are most definitely not God's.

We who call ourselves Christian are not called to give our lives in defense of that system. We are called to be different. Jesus used words like light and salt and leaven to describe the effect his followers were supposed to have on the world around them.

We were never meant, you and I, to look and sound and act like everyone else. We were never meant to fit in - not in the world's way of doing business, not in the world's dependence on aggression and violence, not in the world's acceptance of greed and suffering and exploitation. Those are not our ways.

You and I are called to be different. We play by different rules. We look at the world in different ways. We view the world from a different perspective. Our lives have a different purpose. We are motivated by different goals. We envision a different world.

And we all know – or should know – that being different in this world comes with a price, and many of us – most of us – are not willing to pay that price. We are desperate to fit in. We are scared to death of being different – substantially different and not merely cosmetically different. We all know what happens to people who are really different. The kids in junior high or high school who really were different. The kids who

wore glasses or who weren't attractive or who weren't athletic or who weren't able to keep up or who wore hand-me-down clothes. You name it; anything that made you different from the other kids made you a target of their teasing, their scorn, their pity and sometimes their aggression. Children learn cruelty very early, and some scientists believe that picking on those who are different, especially the weak and vulnerable, is sired into us by evolution; it's a way of weeding out the less fit members of the group. According to this way of looking at the world, it's just human nature.

Perhaps it is, but I wasn't put on this earth to live out human nature, and neither were you. As someone has said, human nature is what we were put here to overcome. We were put here, we believe, by a divine creator to live out a divine image. You and I are not determined by our genes or by our ancestors near or remote or by our circumstances. I don't accept that you and I are forced to conform to the standards of the group. I don't accept that you and I are simply part of the herd. I don't accept that you and I have no power to step away from the group and recognize the group's cruelty and savagery for what it is and to reject it. I don't accept naturalistic reductionism as my way of life.

What I accept, instead, is the call of God to be different. The still-speaking God whose voice I hear invites everyone who thirsts to come to the water, regardless of their ability to pay. The summons that I hear is not to be conformed to this world, this violent and graceless world, but to allow myself to be transformed by the Holy Spirit every day and in every way, more and more, into the likeness of the God who made me and the God who has promised to make me new.

I know that that sounds like pious hot air to some of you, but I assure you, the voice that I'm urging you to listen to will lead you in paths that are not only of paths of righteousness, but are also paths that are the most practical, the most useful, the most humane, the most life-giving, and the most important paths you will ever walk.

Responding to the call of God to be different from this world – to repent, in other words, to use that old-fashioned Lenten language, to change direction – is the most important step you can ever take if you are genuinely serious about changing the world.

Let me illustrate the point and close this sermon by showing you how practical and useful and life-changing and history-changing being different can be. The lesson comes from Martin Niemoeller, a Lutheran pastor who spent eight years in Nazi concentration camps for opposing that murderous regime. Although Niemoeller spoke out against the Nazis' brutality, and although he paid a far higher price than many for his courageous stand, he spent the rest of his life after the war regretting that he did not do more to save people from the hands of the Nazis.

Niemoeller learned too late the danger of being silent even early on when brutality is being waged. Niemoeller learned too late the danger of conforming to a regime that demands conformity. Niemoeller learned too late that ordinary Christians like you and me can collude in the most horrible abominations if we are too frightened or too self-absorbed or too lazy to be different. Niemoeller learned that painful lesson, but he learned it too late, and here's what he wrote to express his regret:

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a communist;
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist;
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew;
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out for me.

My dear friends, Lent is the time when Christian preachers everywhere urge their

listeners to repent, and I'm no exception. I'm urging you to change the course of your life so that you are not simply carried along on the currents of self-satisfaction and self-preservation that are the hallmarks of our business-as-usual world. Living for yourself or for your loved ones is the world's way; getting while the getting's good is our way.

But providing for those who hunger and thirst, physically and spiritually, regardless of their ability to pay or to give you anything in return – that's God's way. Why don't you give that way and try and discover the joy of being different.

