

PASTOR'S NOTES. Serving the Dishonest...

When He was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in His name because they saw the signs that He was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because He knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for He Himself knew what was in everyone.
(John 2:23-25, NRSV)

I read Malcolm Gladwell's book Talking to Strangers (*Little, Brown and Company: 2019*) because, after all, talking with strangers is one of our priorities as Christians. There is no way to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18) without talking to at least a few strangers on the way. The book didn't give a lot of straightforward advice on how to do this, but it did highlight some of the reasons why this is very difficult for us. Specifically, he noted that we tend to be very bad at detecting dishonesty in others, and on the flipside, we get confused when people are honest but don't behave in expected ways (like nervousness, no eye contact, laughing during a tragedy, etc.). In both of those cases, we tend to accurately detect truth or lying less than half of the time. We are worse than just random guessing. And that includes even judges, police officers, therapists, world leaders, and CIA agents.

Dr. Timothy Levine describes Truth Default Theory this way: "when we communicate with other people, we not only tend to believe them, but the thought that maybe we shouldn't does not even come to mind." (timothy-levine.squarespace.com/truth-default-theory). We usually tend to believe people, especially people we feel are like us, until the evidence of their lie becomes overwhelming. On the other hand, there are people who do look on others with more suspicion, and they will more accurately tell when someone is lying. However, the people who mostly live this way often fail to believe when someone really is truthful, and they tend to be hard to live with.

So how are we to behave? Throughout the Bible, we are reminded that we are sinful creatures, pretty much through and through. Here are just a few examples:

*...for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth...
Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...
The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.*
(Genesis 8:21b, Romans 3:23, Psalm 14:2-3, NRSV)

If we take the sinfulness of humanity seriously, we should look at each other with suspicion. We know that most of us will lie or do something worse if it seems to be in our best interest. Our American system is built on the idea that people are basically selfish, and therefore need checks and balances, especially our leaders. Countries that assume people are basically good tend to get taken over by dictators.

But let's refer back to the passage at the beginning. Jesus did not trust people – He knew what they were truly like. However, this did not prevent Him from coming into the world, living among them,

treating them like brothers and sisters, choosing untrustworthy persons for His inner core of disciples, and, ultimately, dying for all of us. I believe the key is in at least three things: first, Jesus was not afraid to be hurt or even killed. When you're not afraid to die, you have almost complete freedom. Second, Jesus always saw us as precious in spite of our human nature. We are sinful, yet worth paying the extreme price to redeem. Third, while Jesus invited people to be all around Him, He did not depend on them to define who He is. Jesus is the least codependent person in the world – He didn't care what people thought of Him. When Jesus is praying for His disciples in the garden:

“I have given them Your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking You to take them out of the world, but I ask You to protect them from the evil one.”
(John 17:14-15, NRSV)

We are called to be in the world, but not of the world. I believe this works best if we follow those three: 1- if we are not afraid to die; 2- if we see those around us, even those we are suspicious of, as precious, worth dying for; 3- if we do not depend on them to define us. We have the church to be the place where we fit in, so we don't have to fit in anywhere else. If we try to fit in the world, we may put our ultimate trust in persons who will abuse us.

So how does this relate to talking with strangers, or doing ministry with dishonest people? We expect to be lied to, and we expect to be afterthoughts in people's selfish minds. This is what they said and did to Jesus. At some point we may have said or did this to Jesus. But now we learn to treat everyone we find like Jesus treats us.

After all, when Jesus talks about the **world** (the Greek word is “cosmos”), He usually talks about it negatively, as in these examples:

*“The **world** cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify against it that its works are evil.”*
(John 7:7, NRSV)

*“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this **world** will keep it for eternal life.”*
(John 12:25, NRSV)

But then we also read:

*“For God so loved the **world** that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the **world**, but in order that the **world** might be saved through Him.”*

(John 3:16-17, NRSV)

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.