

Letting Go of Trying to Change People, April 3, 2019

Oh, if only I could change people to get them to be more like me. Then the world would be a better place. I worked with a pastor for five years who was so different from me, and I so wished I could have waved a magic wand to change him. I spent most of five years just enduring him.

A young, rich ruler comes to Jesus one day and asks, What must I do to inherit eternal life? This is not a question about heaven. This is a question about how to live the kind of life God wants now. He wants to get into a spiritual discussion with Jesus. And Jesus gives a very Jewish answer. He says, You know the commandments. “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.”

The man says, I’ve kept all these since my youth. Here’s the thing about the commandments Jesus quotes. They are all in the negative. The man could say, I didn’t do any of those things. I didn’t murder anyone; I haven’t cheated on my spouse; I didn’t lie. I didn’t cheat in my business. I did honor my father and mother, but you know, they are my parents.

Other than honoring his parents, all of these were things he didn’t do. And Jesus is wondering what he did do with all his wealth. What positive benefit did he offer those in need? So the man, rather smugly, says, I’m doing everything I need to to please God.

And what is Jesus’s response to this smugness, this self-righteousness? Jesus, looking at him, loved him. That is the way Jesus meets people, not with judgment, but with love. Jesus looks at him with love. Now, he doesn’t just invite people to stay the way they are. He invites them into relationship with him. But it comes from love.

When the rich tax collector Zaccaeus climbs up into a sycamore tree to see Jesus pass by, he is being judged by everyone in that village. They all want him to change. They come from judgment. Jesus looks up into that tree with love, and says, Zaccaeus, I need to come and eat at your house today. And by the way, when you ate with someone in the Palestine of Jesus day, you were treating them with respect. Eating with someone was all about social acceptance.

And Zaccaeus ends up changing, giving half his possessions to the poor, because he now was in relationship with Jesus, who loved him. The change happens, but it comes out of a loving relationship.

St. Benedict founded the monastic tradition in Italy in the sixth century. Benedict has a book called *The Rule of St. Benedict*, which lays out the guidelines for the order. In the book, he has a section called, the Reception of Guests. Here's what he says: All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, who said, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Proper honor must be shown to all, especially to those who share our faith, and to pilgrims. Once guests have been announced the prioress or abbot and the community are to meet them with all the courtesy of love.”

What would it mean to receive difficult people as guests in our lives, instead of steeling ourselves against them? What if I had said at the beginning of my time with that pastor who was so difficult for me, God has given him to me as a guest, and I will receive him with love? This person will give me a chance to learn some things I didn't know.

When we resist the people in our lives who frustrate us; when we only see them as problems, then we are not able to learn what we need to from them. And you know, people can sense when you don't accept them, and when you want them to change, and they dig in even more.

What if we came from curiosity? What if we treated others who challenge us as guests in our lives, and we had something to learn from them?

But there is the second part of St. Benedict's rule. He says, The life of the community goes on, even with the guest here. We welcome the guest with love, yes, but the guest and the guest's agenda don't take over the community. So it is with difficult people in our lives, people we'd like to change; people who frustrate us. We can set limits, whatever that might mean for you and the relationship. We treat the person with love and respect, but it's ok to have limits, it's ok to set boundaries.

Margaret Marcuson, who is a local life coach, has a saying I particularly like: It's a matter of shifting from the impossible: controlling others, to the merely difficult: managing myself.

My job is to be concerned with change in me, not in you.

I can't control other people; I can't change other people. But I can work on *my* stuff. That's hard enough. But like a mobile above a baby's crib, when you move one piece of it, the whole thing moves. When my behavior changes, my relationships change. It's like touching that mobile; that relationship can change. But it's more about us changing, and not us trying to change the other.

When we accept other people the way they are, made in God's image, with the gifts and history and story that they have, then there is a freedom for God to work in the relationship.

And it's amazing how liberating that is. We can give up measuring people according to our expectations. And when we let go, and just do the work of love, we let God do the work of change.

Remember the poem from Mary Oliver last week? My work is to love the world, not to change you. Jesus looks at the rich, young ruler and loves him. Jesus looks up in the tree and loves Zaccaeus. So may God help us to look with love, and to welcome all people in our lives as guests. Amen.