

I had rotator cuff surgery a few years ago. Since I couldn't drive for several weeks, people took turns giving me rides to and from the grocery store and to the church where I worked. It was about a half an hour away. One day, a congregant picked me up and we chatted about this and that. I don't remember most of what we talked about, but I do remember a story he told me.

One Saturday morning his dad woke him up early. He said they were going to paint. (Paint what? Where? Why?) This person's mother was a nurse and someone she worked with at the hospital, a gay man, had been the victim of a hate crime. Someone had spray painted horrible sayings on the side of the side of the home he owned with his partner.

My congregant told the story of his father's fury that anyone would disparage love and that's why with a gallon of white paint in back, they were headed to erase the hateful words. The kindness and the lessons in this story were powerful, but I hadn't thought of about it in some time. Then I read about something similar in the Portland Press Herald this week.

There was a story that told of a Jewish man whose fence was painted with an anti-Semitic slur in Litchfield 28 years ago. The local paper ran a story on it and the next day a man who had just moved to Litchfield called to say that he wanted to paint their fence. The author of the article said, "I think about that man from time to time. He wanted to repaint my family's fence. More importantly, he mended my heart."

Each of us has that power. The power to heal. The power to help. The power to let people know that they are not alone. Alone physically or alone in whatever they're dealing with. This is the power to help shoulder another's burden. The power to walk with another and offer a ministry of presence, whether in person, over the phone, via video chat, or even through postcards or letters. In doing so, we are demonstrating our Christianity. Having someone say, "I see you and what you're experiencing and I will be by your side through it" is extraordinarily powerful. It is the Christian thing to do.

You may have heard the saying, "you may be the only Bible someone ever reads", meaning embody Christ's teachings and will show people what Christianity is all about.

The passage from the Bible, though written about 2,000 years ago has some real lessons for us today. Reflecting on it, you can see that the people of the time were poised at a threshold between the time of waiting for Christ and the time of incorporating Christ's teachings. I think it's particularly appropriate to consider our reading as one of a time of transition because it seems to me that we are at the threshold of another time of major transition. We're on the threshold between the time of how the world was and how it will be, how work was and how it will be, how school was and how it will be and how church was and how it will be and what it

will become in light of the emerging needs brought about by the two concurrent pandemics we're facing.

In the Scripture, the people listening aren't sure if Jesus is the one they've been waiting for. They're having trouble recognizing him even though they had the data.

When the tsunami struck Thailand in 2004 everyone was taken by surprise, but some, a few had ancient stories to guide their actions. There was one group of indigenous people who survived. The Moken had heard ancient stories of the 'laboon'—a wave so powerful that it would swallow up everything in its path. The Moken people recognized laboon and took immediate action to head up the mountains or out to deep sea. That action ultimately saved their lives.

In Jesus' time, everyone knew the stories, but they still didn't put two and two together. He compares that generation--the people in the community--to children. Children who don't know what they're dealing with. Children who have certain expectations of others based on their own behavior. These children are calling out to each other, pointing fingers and saying you didn't measure up to what I expected you to do. I played the flute, but you didn't dance. I cried and you didn't match my affect. Nothing seems to click. You're not satisfied no matter what I do.

You see, all these people had the information to recognize both John and Jesus, but they filtered what they saw and experienced through judgment. People had badmouthed John. Because he wasn't eating or drinking, he must be possessed by a demon. Jesus comes along eating and drinking and he's badmouthed as a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Damned if you do and damned if you don't. Either way, our heroes couldn't win.

That happened long ago and far away and we're very different than they were. If Jesus showed up today, surely we'd recognize him, right? The truth is that everyone filters the outer world through the inner world.

There was once an empty nest couple who downsized to a smaller home on the other side of town. Each morning, they'd sit down to have breakfast together. About a week into their time in their new place, the wife saw her neighbor hanging children's clothing on a clothesline. What caught her attention was the color of the clothes. "Those clothes aren't clean. I wonder what detergent she uses. Those clothes are still filthy." This happened week after week with the woman criticizing her neighbor's cleanliness. Finally, one Friday morning as they sat down to breakfast, the woman noticed something different. She pointed it out to her husband, "Oh my gosh, look, she must have a new washing machine—her clothes are finally clean!" "Actually," said her husband, "I got up early this morning and washed our windows. It made all the difference in the world."

How clear is your own window to the world?

Wisdom was vindicated by her actions. Jesus was found to be not guilty of being a drunkard or a glutton or a shady character by virtue of his actions. But isn't it sad that innocent people had to be cleared of people's previously held erroneous convictions?

Remember, we tend to filter everyone and everything through our own perception. What does your filter consist of? Loving kindness and grace or judgment? Jesus reminds us that we need him and we need one another. And we need to rely on his wisdom and his teachings to know how to best be together.

In the second part of our passage today, Jesus thanks God for hiding things from the 'wise and intelligent' and showing them to the infants. (He doesn't say children here, but infants—those who may still need God's caretaking. Those could possibly be the unclean, the lepers, the lame, the blind, the beggars, the women, probably even the tax collectors and those identified as sinners). Those considered 'wise and intelligent' are probably the Pharisees and the ruling class.

Then Jesus offers the opportunity to draw close and rest with him. He says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest". Those who were burdened were all those I just mentioned. They were carrying the burdens of poverty, shame, and discrimination. Later in the gospel, Jesus scolds scribes and Pharisees because they place heavy burdens on others, but won't help them carry them.

In Biblical times, a yoke had connotations of subservience, obedience, allegiance, justice--and also wisdom (in the book of Sirach "Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction"). The stoles that pastors wear are a sign of our office--a sign of being yoked to Christ. When we think of a yoke today, we may think of horses. A draft horse can pull about 8,000 pounds, but two draft horses together can pull (not 16,000 pounds, but) 24,000 pounds! How much do you think you could carry if Christ helped you to carry it?

Imagine being yoked to Christ. What if you walk closely with him, letting him share your burdens? What if, when you're walking with Christ, you let him share his wisdom....and you realize that you have the power to lift another's burdens...(possibly through something as simple as painting...)Your holy homework is to ponder: walking yoked side by side to Jesus. What burdens you will share with Jesus? Where do you think he will lead you? Will there be an opportunity to help lighten another's heavy burden? Blessed be and amen.