

Have you ever looked at someone and thought they look trustworthy? Or encountered someone and instantly felt afraid or apprehensive? What was it about that person's appearance that caused you to feel that they could be trusted? What was it about them that made you feel afraid or apprehensive? Was it their eyes, their hair, their clothes, their skin? We often find ourselves in situations where we must make split decisions and judgments about others. Sometimes we judge correctly, and other times our judgment is clouded by what appears before us. Maybe they are elegantly dressed or shabbily clothed and their hair is disheveled. There is a saying that goes, "you cannot judge a book by its cover." It is only in turning the page and reading the story contained between those pages that we get to learn what the cover does not reveal. I bought a used book online once. The seller described the book as being gently used but in good condition. When the book arrived, I was pleased, it appeared just as described gently used but otherwise in good condition. I was pleased because as I was turning a page of the book the book fell apart and I found myself holding half the book in one hand and the other half of the book in the other hand. Unfortunately, what appeared to be a good deal turned into a costly mistake. I still needed the book for a class so in the end I had to buy a new copy, at an additional cost to myself.

In the days when Jesus dwelt among the people there were those who appeared righteous according to the law. At first glance, the Pharisees, who were influential Jewish leaders of the day known for their extensive knowledge and ritualistic observation of the laws of the Torah and teachings of Moses, appear to be the model of religious piety. Their adherence to the laws set down by Moses gave the appearance that they lived their lives to the honor and glory of God and yet they often find themselves at odds with Jesus who challenged their ritualistic observances and adherences to the law.

Matthew 23: 2-5, Addressing the disciples and a crowd of followers Jesus says,

²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; ³ therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others.

The Pharisees know the letter of the law for they studied the words set down in Scripture. Jesus does not challenge their knowledge of teaching of Moses and encourages the people to

follow their example that way. What Jesus challenges are their motivations for following the letter of the law. Their lives are not transformed by their adherence to the laws, nor do they seek to transform the lives of others, they merely give the appearance of living for God when what they are really after is the applause of man and the status that is afforded them by their apparent living. When Jesus challenges the Pharisees, he is challenging a life lived that is only lived on the surface of their faith.

In our reading for today, the writer of our scripture passage notes, “what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, - this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.” The experience the writer speaks about is an experience that goes beyond the cover of the book. It goes to the heart of the gospel teachings of Jesus Christ. What is revealed is life giving and life sustaining.

The writer of the text goes on to say: This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷ but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Now the word sin is not a word most of us use in our day-to-day life nor do we speak of committing transgressions against God or wronging God. According to the definition in my “A Handbook of Theological Terms,” sin is “usually defined as any act, which includes thoughts as well as deeds, done in conscious and deliberate violation of Gods’ will as expressed in the revealed or natural law.” Sin is an act of defiance. To sin is to go against who God has created us to be. God’s will is revealed in the Word of God made flesh and set down in the Holy Scriptures. The scripture writer warns us not to be deceived. If we believe that we do not sin than we are not in need of salvation that comes through Jesus Christ.

Do you recall the question I posed at the beginning of this sermon? Let me remind you: “Have you ever looked at someone and thought they look trustworthy? Or encountered someone and instantly felt afraid or apprehensive?” What was the criteria for your assessment? These questions weighed heavily on my mind while I prepared for today’s sermon. I encounter these questions everyday as I go about my daily living. The question we must ask ourselves is who determines what a trustworthy person looks like.

Currently the trial for George Floyd is underway. I cannot bring myself to watch it or to listen to comments surrounding his death. Too often when the victim of a police shooting is a person of color that person’s life and lifestyle are put on trial and not the one who is accused of their death. Communities of color are left to pick up the pieces of a broken justice system when the accused goes free wondering when will justice be served.

The global pandemic that has rocked the world and our nation has brought about a rise in discrimination against and hatred toward our Asian siblings in Christ. We all bear the burden of hatred and discrimination; it is the darkness of sin. A darkness that prevents us from seeing the image of God in others. The sin of hatred and discrimination separates us from God because it separates us one from another, it allows our prejudices and biases to blind us to our common humanity. This is a darkness that we are not able on our own to overcome.

This second Sunday of Easter we are reminded in verse 5 of 1 John 2 that “God is light and in him there is not darkness at all.” As I was preparing today’s message, I was reminded that the word “light” can be used as a noun and a verb. When we say that Jesus is the Light of the world, we are saying that the presence of Jesus dispels darkness. He is the lightbulb in our lamp. To light something is to perform an action, such as when we light a candle in the dark. When a candle is lit it too can dispel the darkness. The act of lighting a candle is intentional.

The revealed love of God is Jesus Christ. Jesus reminds his disciples and the crowd that gathered around him that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls. But Jesus did not stop there He goes on to say that the second greatest commandment is like the first “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” To love oneself is to recognize the image of God in oneself, to love your neighbor is to recognize the image of God in them.

In Jesus Christ, the church is called to be one body, a glimpse of the kingdom of God on earth, where all the categories that we have placed upon ourselves to distinguish one from another disappear. This does not mean that we become one homogenous group of people losing who we are to become replicas of one another. It signifies that the body of Christ is made up of a multiplicity of peoples from various backgrounds. To walk in the light of Christ, we must put away the darkness of hatred and discrimination and show love for another, to love as Christ first loved us. When we look at the cross of Jesus Christ, we see that there is a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension. Through the cross, Jesus Christ redeems all of creation. Through his redemption, humanity is reconciled to God. Through His redemption, we are adopted, as beloved children of God. This is the vertical dimension.

However, there is also a horizontal dimension. We, as beloved children of God, are called to love each other as Christ first loved us. Through dying on the cross, Jesus took the darkness of the sin to his grave that we may bear it no more. In rising to glory, he cleared the path for us to become children of light transformed in his newness. As we continue to celebrate this Easter season may we allow this transformation to give us fresh eyes to see neighbor as friend, mouths to speak out against hatred and discrimination and hearts anew and a boldness to live into the radical love of Jesus Christ. Amen.