

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 25, 2019

“You Can’t Please Everybody.”

Luke 13:10-17

Have you ever noticed that no matter what you do, you can’t please everybody? Somebody somewhere is going to criticize your best efforts.

Former president John F. Kennedy once told about a legendary baseball player who always played flawlessly. He consistently hit and was never thrown out at first base. When on base he never failed to score. He never dropped a ball and threw with unerring accuracy. He ran quickly and played perfectly. Actually, he would have been one of the all-time greats except for one problem. No one could persuade him to throw away his snack and come out of the press box to play. Anybody know someone like that? They won’t try to do something significant themselves, but they sure can criticize those who do.

Jesus encountered people like that. He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. A woman was in the synagogue with a spirit (illness) that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was unable to stand up.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.” The Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?”

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing.

That’s amazing, isn’t it? Not the miracle, but the reaction to the miracle. Jesus healed the poor little lady who was bent over. Helped her stand straight and tall for the first time in eighteen years. And the leader of the synagogue criticized him for it.

First of all, we shouldn’t be surprised that this criticism was voiced by the leader of the synagogue. Now don’t misunderstand me. He could have been the chairperson of a United Methodist Church board as easily as he was the leader of the synagogue. Religious affiliation is not a factor here. The point is that he was a top dog...until Jesus came along. And this leader of the synagogue had certainly never healed anybody. Can you imagine that he was feeling just a little bit threatened by this upstart Jesus? A little bit envious? There is nothing like having a person come along who is just a little bit smarter, a little more capable, a little more attractive to cause you to start finding fault. Envy really can be a monster in some people’s lives.

It can happen between friends. It can happen in families. And, of course, it happens in church. People get envious. And then they become critical. And, if that doesn’t satisfy them, then crucifixion is the next logical step.

And we shouldn’t be surprised that he chose religious grounds for making his attack. People are strange. They will hate in the name of love, kill in the name of peace, and demean in the name of holiness. Some of the greatest evil in this world is perpetrated by people who act under the name of religion.

There was a news report quite a few years ago. Before the start of the first Persian Gulf war, Israel’s Chief Rabbi Mordecai Eliyahu ruled that, in case of an Iraqi chemical attack, ultra-Orthodox Jewish men could break Jewish law and shave their beards. That was so gas masks could fit properly over their beards. Eliyahu urged bearded men to carry scissors in their pocket in case they needed to shave quickly. (He forgot to tell them not to breathe until shaved).

Also, although Jewish law regarding the Sabbath forbids simple physical activities such as turning on the radio, the threat of Iraqi missile attacks once the war started sent Israel’s chief rabbis scrambling to the Scriptures for loopholes so Orthodox Jews could listen to the news for warnings. The rabbis ruled that leaving the radio on during the Sabbath was permissible provided it was on low volume. “If there is a real alarm, you can turn up the volume but in a nonconventional manner,” said the rabbis, “with a stick or with your elbow. Controlling the volume in a different manner still marks the Sabbath as different from the rest of the week.”

Many of us wish that we had more reverence in our society for the Sabbath, but the legalists in Jesus’ time had let things get out of hand. Interpreting the law regarding the Sabbath so strictly that a person could not be healed on the Sabbath was repulsive to Jesus. And he said so, in no uncertain terms. So, what do we have up to this point? We have a religious leader criticizing Jesus and we have him doing it on religious grounds. There is something else we need to note.

This criticism, though unjustified, still took its toll. The leader of the synagogue looked petty in his criticism. He WAS petty in his criticism. Luke sums it up like this: Jesus' "opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." But still the constant barrage of backbiting took its toll. This leader's criticism was one more piece of wood used to construct the cross on which Jesus died.

The tongue is a powerful weapon, isn't it? Whether it's idle criticism, or vicious gossip, or actually bearing false witness against somebody, the tongue can kill. In a sense, it killed Jesus. The nails driven into his hands and feet were just an extension of the animosity stirred up by his enemies through their lies and criticisms. Words of old say, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." But that's not true. Words do hurt.

Words can hurt. Words can drain us of our energy and make us feel diminished as human beings. I'm not going to ask you to hold up your hand if anybody has ever said anything to you that has caused you pain. Something a parent said to you. Or a teacher. Or a friend. Even a pastor. We should not be surprised that the leader of the synagogue criticized Jesus. We should not be surprised that he used religious language. And we should not be surprised that this criticism as well as the criticism of others, took their toll on Jesus and on those who followed him. Those words of criticism finally led to Jesus' crucifixion. Words have that power.

There is one last thing that I like us to see. The negative words of his enemies did not defeat Christ's ultimate goal. Jesus' critics ultimately defeated themselves. Another way of saying this is that eventually truth is victorious. That is why we should never let negative words of others handicap or defeat us. If we keep giving our best, we will experience victory. And it will be even sweeter because of the negative predictions we have received.

A newspaper editor was present when Abraham Lincoln gave the Gettysburg address. Afterward the editor called Lincoln's speech "silly" and said that hopefully it would quickly be forgotten. Guess who has been forgotten? The newspaper editor. Meanwhile another generation of young people memorize those words spoken long ago, "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal..."

Critics abound. Whether in politics, or in organizations, in the home, and even in church. Unfortunately, they take their toll. They put Jesus on the cross. But truth cannot be defeated. Hold on if someone is criticizing you. Do the right thing and eventually you will be victorious.