

September 9, 2018
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18, Year B, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
Psalm 125
James 2:1-10, 14-17
Mark 7:24-37

Human beings seem to be compelled to categorize other human beings. The moment we turn to a stranger, the categorization begins. With a glance, we click off boxes for gender, race, age, and physical ability. Taking a closer look, we move on to things like clothing and cleanliness and conformity—conformity to a host of socially prescribed behavioral norms. Chancing a conversation, we take in accent and word choice, which hints as to origin and education. In the blink of an eye, we process all this and more, making determinations about things like class and wealth, physical and mental health, political inclination, and so much more.

At least one study has shown that even babies notice ethnicity; maybe all this categorizing is built in.¹ And maybe that's okay. Categorization isn't necessarily a problem. The *problem* is that not all categories are created equal. Categories carry *relative value*.

I occupy a very different social location than many other members of my family of origin. I have more education; my way of speaking is less regional; I have greater financial resources. On the relative value scale, these things put me way *ahead*. I don't necessarily feel good about this. On the other hand, I am gender nonconforming—to use language for it I didn't even have ten years ago. My gender nonconformity is more noticeable here in New Haven, Connecticut, than it was in Burlington, Vermont, or Berkeley, California. On the relative value scale, my gender nonconformity puts me *behind*, and farther behind here than in other places I've lived. I don't necessarily feel good about this, either.

I don't really know how that relative value system has netted out in my life. In this season *of* my life, I'm more concerned about how I apply it to others. And I certainly do apply it to others. Case in point: the K2 overdoses on the New Haven Green a couple of weeks ago. The number of overdoses was over 100, while the number of affected people was 47.² Do the math: many people overdosed multiple times. The police chief said that one person overdosed *six* times.³ It's hard to admit that my sympathy for that person plummeted to something near zero. You might say that that person landed at the *bottom* of my relative value scale. This is not something of which I am proud.

In the news this week was a media incident that was tagged as a case of “job shaming.” Actor Geoffrey Owens, formerly of The Cosby Show, was photographed doing his job as a checker at Trader Joe's. The photographer posted the photo on social media, and the photo went viral. The actor pushed back, arguing for the value of *any* honest work. He was interviewed on several news shows, sporting both his Trader Joe's nametag and a Yale baseball cap. Yes, he's a graduate, with honors. On the value ranking scale, a Yale degree puts a person *way* ahead.

I'm still pondering that Yale baseball cap. I don't know why he wore it. But I imagine Owens' diploma working in him as a sort of inoculation, protecting him from being shamed.

Let's turn to today's gospel. Experts say that this passage from Mark is intended to affirm what is expressed elsewhere in the gospels: though Jesus' mission is *initially* focused on the Jews, it will *eventually* be extended to the gentiles. But there *must* be more to it than that. There must be a reason why the story is told the way it is.

I want to focus on the first part of the reading. Jesus has traveled to a gentile area. He is trying to *hide out*, but he's quickly *found out*. A woman, a gentile, needs help, and she has decided that Jesus is the person who can provide it. She is an unlikely petitioner: her categories of gender and religion are all wrong. Undeterred, she finds Jesus, bows at his feet, and begs him to cast the demon from her daughter.

She shouldn't even be there, much less expect to *get* anything. This woman occupies the *wrong* spot on Jesus' relative value scale. In response to her petition, Jesus is ... *rude*. He doesn't simply refuse her. Choosing words that seem calculated to *shame*, he equates the woman and her daughter with dogs. The woman doesn't have a Yale hat, but she must have something, because she *refuses* to be shamed. Instead, she pushes back, lofting herself beyond any categorical limitation. Rejecting Jesus' assessment of her *relative value*, she *destroys the scale*. Jesus has no choice but to change his mind; he heals that woman's daughter.

It can be hard to know where to locate ourselves in this story. Sometimes we're the woman, demanding to our rightful value. But sometimes we are trying like heck to reconstruct the scale that she destroyed. It's this second role that is so easy to fall into, whether we come out ahead or behind. Maybe it's the sinful nature of the fragile human ego that leaves us *so* fearful of coming up short, that we keep on measuring ourselves against everyone else. Maybe it's our existence in an economic culture that pits us one against another in a zero-sum game. Whatever the reason, wherever we are on the scale, we want—we need—to get ahead, and therefore someone must be left behind. Even if we're uncomfortable with the relative value scale, we find it so hard to manage without it—even if *we* end up coming out behind.

The Gospels are the antithesis of a zero-sum game. Jesus can heal Jews—and Gentiles. Jesus *will* heal everyone; there is plenty of healing to go around. In fact, there is plenty of *everything* to go around. God will see to that. We can categorize all we want. But God values every one of us just the same every other, as God's most precious child. If that's what God would do, our goal is to do the same. It doesn't even matter who has a Yale hat. When you think about it, you can't possibly imagine it—or want it—any other way.

Today is Startup Sunday. It's a good day to say that I am more optimistic about St. Thomas's than I ever have been, and that's saying a lot. The work that we have been doing together *is* paying off. We *are* growing, by *every* measure. But a growing church is also a changing church. And a changing church is always a challenge.

A great article arrived via email this week entitled, “Five Lies We Like to Tell About Church Growth.” Let me read part of it to you.

Lie #5: Our church wants to grow. In many churches (especially stable or declining ones) leaders act surprised if you ask whether they want growth. “Of course we do!” they say. This is the biggest lie of all, and the most innocent. Consider what it means to want your church to grow. For established members, growth means taking away the church they love and replacing it with something that feels strange and alien. . . .

No one who understands what growth involves would “want” it, in the sense that we “want” pleasure or consumer goods. The only reason a sane person would want a church to grow is because they believe it has *something of importance to offer other people* [emphasis added]. For that goal, some people will accept the hard work, sacrifice, and inconvenience growth requires.

Church growth does not proceed from working harder or more diligently at what you are already doing. Growth means doing something new.⁴

Without question, this church has “something of importance to offer other people.” Whether we encounter them *in here* or *out there*, some of those people will challenge us, our categories, and our scales. May God bless us with the courage and the strength to continue to do what growth requires.

Notes

¹ Stuart Wolpert, “Infants show apparent awareness of ethnic differences, UCLA psychologists report,” December 13, 2016, UCLA Newsroom online, available at <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/infants-show-apparent-awareness-of-ethnic-differences-ucla-psychologists-report> (accessed September 8, 2018).

² Ed Stannard, “Overdose crisis highlighted needs for more police, social services,” August 19, 2018, New Haven Register online, available at <https://www.nhregister.com/news/article/Overdose-crisis-highlighted-needs-for-more-13164833.php> (accessed September 8, 2018).

³ New Haven Police Chief Anthony Campbell, said during meeting with local clergy, August 21, 2018.

⁴ Dan Hotchkiss, “Five Lies We Like to Tell About Church Growth,” June 11, 2018, Congregational Consulting Group online, available at <http://www.congregationalconsulting.org/five-lies-we-like-to-tell-about-church-growth/> (accessed September 8, 2018).