

Personalism
John 4
July 29 2018

The last time I was up in this pulpit, I was looking out at a sea of eager and somewhat anxious faces — it was the Sunday before our Appalachia trip, and, as you remember, we invited participants in this year’s trip to be here for a blessing and a send-off -- and strawberry shortcake, too.

And the next Saturday, all three hundred and six of us headed off to West Virginia for a week of repairing homes for families in need. We made 42 homes warmer, safer and drier, grew together in friendship and faith, and — except for five stitches on one kid — we did it all injury-free.

And in the three weeks that we’ve been back, what’s been pretty special is running into kids who went, or their parents, and hearing them say these words:

“Alida, that was life-changing.”

“Alida, my son is not the same.”

“What happens on that trip, Alida? My daughter says she looks at everything differently now.”

It sounds like hyperbole, I know, but the truth is that, well, it’s *truth*.

A mission trip, even a short-term mission trip can achieve that.

It **can** be life-changing —

because it can change the lens through which someone sees the world.

I see it in them, too. I *hear* it from them.

They tell me they never imagined what poverty looks like, feels like. They tell me they never knew how good it feels to exhaust yourself in the service of others.

But one difference I particularly notice, one thing that changes between the first day of the trip and the last day, is this:

On the first day,
when we come together as a group
and I ask them to talk about why they're on the trip,
what they're expecting, what they're hoping,
I hear this:

"I'm here to help the less fortunate.

I'm here to do something good for poor people."

At the end of the week, when we ask them what they experienced, this is what they say:

"I'm so glad I could get Martha's floor fixed for her."

"Kenny and Travis were such cute kids, I loved that we finished up their bedroom for them."

"I'm going to miss Jimmy so much, he told the best stories. I learned so much from him."

The "less fortunate" become Martha and Jimmy and Travis.

The "poor people" somewhere out there are now Mary and Kenny and Bob.

There's not some faceless group anymore,
some demographic entity.

Instead, there's the man who told you stories on his front porch and played a mean banjo,

there's the boy who picked up a hammer and helped you get those last shingles on,
there's the girl who told you all her dreams for her life, and hugged you when you left.
It's personal now.
It's personal.

David Brooks, columnist for the New York Times, wrote a great piece a couple months ago, calling for a revival of what he called Personalism. Personalism. Here's what David Brooks said —
"Our culture," he wrote, "does a pretty good job of ignoring the uniqueness and depth of each person.
Pollsters see people in terms of demographic groups.
Big data counts people as if it were counting apples.
We journalists, Brooks says, we like to talk in shorthand about *Trump voters* or *social justice warriors*.
But when you actually meet people they defy categories.
Someone just might be a socialist Mormon cowboy from Arizona.

Personalism, he writes, recognizes there is a depth and complexity to each human,
that gives each person unique and infinite dignity.
And that dignity does not depend on what you do or how successful you are.
Infinite worth is inherent in being human.
And therefore, every human encounter is a meeting of equals.
Doing community service, he insists, isn't about *saving 'the poor'* — it's a meeting of equals.
Personalism means seeing another person in their full depth.

Well, I loved reading this.

I saved the column as soon as I read it,
because my immediate reaction was:

This is what we do.

This is what we try to do here — not just in Appalachia, but always.

We embrace personalism:

we try always to honor others as children of God,
as people of infinite worth.

And we do it because, you know, that Christlikeness thing.

Personalism was what Jesus embodied.

Seeing people in their full depth: that's what he did.

Everything was personal for Jesus.

Every person he encountered, he was able to see fully.

I had Greg read that story to you from John's Gospel because it's one
of my favorite examples of Jesus doing what he did all the time —
connecting with someone completely personally,
someone whom everyone else just lumped into a category.

You heard the story.

But let me remind you of it again.

Jesus is on a long walk, from Judea to Galilee by way of Samaria.

And he's surely exhausted, and he's hungry, and — unusually -- he's
alone,

because his disciples having wandered off another direction in search
of food.

And then he sees it — a welcome sight for a tired traveler — a well.

But a well by itself does no good to a thirsty person — you need a
bucket to draw the water.

And so Jesus, Christ himself, has to wait until someone shows up.

And they do show up. Or rather, she shows up.
A woman from the village,
whom Jesus asks for the gift of water
under the broiling noontime sun of Samaria.
And they get to talking,
and what they end up talking about is God.
Jesus is in Samaria
having a conversation with a woman
about God.

It would be hard to overstate just how many social conventions
Jesus was shredding in that moment.

First, Jews and Samaritans — they didn't talk to each other.
They *hated* each other.

Different tribes, different ways of worshiping, different accents,
different looks.

Hated each other.

And a woman?

Men did not have public conversations with women, for heaven's sake.
Oh, and chatting about God?

NO no no and no.

Any self-respecting teacher, rabbi,
only talked to his male students about matters of such importance.

And, by the way, in the lengthy part of the story that I didn't make
Greg read,

you find out that this woman has had five husbands,
so she's a social pariah —

that's probably why she's at the well all by herself in the noontime
heat — way past the hour when all the other women went to the well.

Jesus does not care.

He doesn't see any kind of category standing in front of him,
he doesn't see a Samaritan, a woman, an outcast, none of that.

He sees a **person**,

a person who responds to his questions with eagerness and
intelligence,

who turns out to know her scripture pretty darn well.

And what happens in this encounter,
is that Jesus ends up sharing something
that he hasn't told anyone else yet.

The woman says, "I believe the Messiah is coming soon,"
and Jesus says, "Hey — I am that one."

It's an amazing conversation.

And it happens only because Jesus takes that personalism thing
seriously.

This woman is not a category to him.

She's not a demographic.

She is a person of infinite worth.

Personalism means encountering people in their fullness,
getting to know their stories,
remembering, as the saying goes,
that everyone is in a struggle you know nothing about.

It means being open to others,
making yourself available to others,
listening listening listening.

It's what Jesus did,
at a well in Samaria,
and at dinners with tax collectors
and in leprosy villages
and in the home of a Roman soldier, too.

Every story mattered, every person had worth.

David, as I already mentioned, is right now in Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia.

And few months back, there were big headlines out of Slovakia — or at least smaller headlines back on page 3 or 5 or so.

A right-wing government,
widespread allegations of corruption,
tens of thousands of protesters in the streets.

So there we were, David and I, just a few nights ago, in a little establishment — okay, a little bar, and it's a quiet night so it's just us and the owner.

And David turns and says to the guy,
"hey, we saw those headlines — tell us what happened."
And I have to admit, my first thought was,
"oh geez, David, we don't know this guy — politics, really?"

But the next thing that happens is that Martin — that's his name, Martin — has pulled a chair over, and he's telling us everything, he's telling us what he believes in, and what he hopes for, and what scares and angers him, and why he marched in the street; and before long, we honestly know his whole life story, because David keeps asking him questions, and we keep listening. And now it's *personal* — now those headlines we saw aren't just headlines, and the pictures of people in the streets aren't just pictures anymore, they're person after person like Martin, hoping and believing and angry and scared, and wanting — just like each of us —

for a world that's better than it is right now.
We listen to him for an hour, and now it's personal.

That's what happens to our teens on the Appalachia trip.
Exactly what David Brooks says must happen,
must happen with all of us.

Headlines become people,
categories become individuals,
stereotypes become human beings.

The - quote - "less fortunate"

are now Brenda, the young mother living in the home her granddaddy
built and trying to figure how to buy diapers for her baby.

Or Billy who would love to go to college but has no idea how that can
happen for him.

Or Alice, who wants to know all about you because you remind her of
her daughter up in Ohio.

Personalism.

Personalism.

Where we go **wrong** in this world is when the people we share this
earth with become categories to us,
groups, stereotypes, demographics.

When we say "those people," or "they should,"
or "they always" or "I don't like them."

When get it **right** is when we make it personal —
when we are like Jesus at the well —

open to another's story,
eager to learn and to listen,
aware of each person's inherent, infinite worth.

Every human encounter, wrote David Brooks, is a meeting of equals.

Every human encounter is a meeting of equals.

I'm going to close with a story that was shared with me on the Appalachia trip, by someone who's become a special friend because of this trip.

Steve Adams is his name,
and way back when, before my time here,
he helped organize ASP at Greenfield Hill church.

But he moved away just as I arrived here.

Now living in Texas, now in his mid-70's, Steve has reconnected with us,

and last year and this year he drove to West Virginia from Texas to be one of our ASP leaders.

Steve has a heart the size of Texas,
and a love for kids that's boundless.

He also knows and lives the truth that each person has inherent worth.
And this year, Steve gave me this story to share with the kids.

It goes like this:

There once was a rabbi who was asked by his students, "Teacher, how would one determine the hour when night ends and day begins?"

One student suggested, 'Is it when one can distinguish a sheep from a dog in the distance?'

"No," said the rabbi.

"A second student ventured, 'Is it when one can distinguish a date tree from a fig tree in the distance?'"

"No," said the rabbi.

"Please tell us the answer," the students begged.

And the rabbi said this: "Day begins when you can look into the face of a stranger and see your sister or brother," he said.

"Until then, night is still with us."

Which is to say: Make it personal.

And by so doing,

be the ones who carry the light.

Make it personal, and you will be the ones who are bringers of the dawn. Amen.