

Sermon: Can Helpful Ideas Come from Harmful People
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels, 1.28.24

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

The TV show, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, has a scene where the main character, playing himself, Larry David, is waiting outside of a theater. He is whistling a tune. Another character stands next to him, listens to the song Larry is whistling, turns to him, and says, "Excuse me, aren't you Jewish?" Larry stops whistling, looks at the man and says indigently, "Yes." The man says, "Then how can you whistle that tune?!" Larry responds, "It's a beautiful piece of music." The man says, "But it's Wagner! Wagner!! You know, Wagner and the Nazis... How dare you!" Larry responded that the man is who the man is but his music is beautiful.

The question is, can helpful ideas come from harmful people? That was our discussion group topic this past week. I'm going to attempt to answer that question in today's sermon.

At the Women's Group, I usually play a YouTube clip of a comedy stand up routine. I almost played the well-known, and hilarious, segment of Noah talking to God by Bill Cosby. But I like my job so I didn't do it; but, it underlines the question, can funny things come from harmful people.

I'm going to look through three lenses at this question – through an individual lens, through the lens of Christian faith and through the lens of our corporate faith and expression.

Individually, we each come up with our own coping mechanisms when it comes to helpful ideas from harmful people. I don't think you can make it through life without being harmed, let down, screwed over, by someone; especially someone with authority – a parent, a teacher, a boss, a medical professional. We all make mistakes but sometimes we run into harmful people. We each get to figure out how to take something good, or beautiful, that has come from someone that has harmed us.

At the first church I served post seminary graduation and ordination, I had a wonderful Rector. There were three churches that were vying for me to serve there and this one church was chosen primarily because of how good of a mentor I would have in their Rector. Three months into my internship – called a Curacy – the Rector informed his leadership that he was a closet alcoholic and was entering a 30-day in-house rehab. It caused the church to go into a tailspin. They felt betrayed and wounded because this was a big surprise to everyone. It threw a wrench into my development too. I had to personally, individually, figure out a coping mechanism for taking what I had – and will – learn from him and how to separate the harmful actions of alcoholism. Likewise, as a faithful person, and trusting in Jesus' call for us to forgive as we have been

forgiven, I had to walk that path in faith. And, corporately, the church had to come up with a response on how to live with harmful actions from a helpful person.

In American history, we learn how important Thomas Jefferson is to our preamble and constitution. In the preamble, Jefferson was in favor of these words: All men are created equal. Yet, he owned slaves. We have to figure out how to deal with the Jeffersonian ideals and the way he conducted his life. And, we do that individually, as people of faith, and corporately. Jumping to faith and our corporate, communal life of faith in the Church, we see that both the belief that all people are created equal and that we strive for equal protection under the law; we credit Jefferson with putting us on that path with the recognition that we have not gotten there yet. We are striving for it. It's a goal placed in front of us for every generation to succeed better than the past to get there.

Going back to how we dealt with being let down by our pastor, the Rector of the parish, as he went into rehab, the Bishop was at the church on the following Sunday – the first of the Rector's absence. During his sermon, the Bishop asked us to turn to page 873 in the Book of Common Prayer. That is the Historical Documents section. In particular, we were going to read Article 26 of the Articles of Faith – a unifying document used to stop the warring factions in the Church of England and create a middle ground, a *via media*, for the Church to live by. It was later ratified and adopted in the Episcopal Church, USA, in 1801. Here is article 26:

XXVI. Of the Unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacraments.

Although in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good, and sometimes the evil have chief authority in the Ministration of the Word and Sacraments, yet forasmuch as they do not the same in their own name, but in Christ's, and do minister by his commission and authority, we may use their Ministry, both in hearing the Word of God, and in receiving the Sacraments. Neither is the effect of Christ's ordinance taken away by their wickedness, nor the grace of God's gifts diminished from such as by faith, and rightly, do receive the Sacraments ministered unto them; which be effectual, because of Christ's institution and promise, although they be ministered by evil men.

Let's take a look at the first sentence, in the visible (earthly) Church, the evil be ever mingled with the good. Take a minute with that. It's the recognition that harmful people are in a helpful place. The evil be ever mingled with the good. In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus ran into a possessed man in a house of prayer. That is highlighting this phrase of the evil and good mingled in the Church.

Article 26 goes on to say, as you read, that evil men (women had yet to be ordained) can perform sacramental work because it is not done in their name but in the name of Christ. And, it was instituted not by them but by Christ. Therefore, the sacraments are valid, even if performed by an evil person.

Can helpful ideas come from harmful people? Yes. The Spirit that runs through all of us, that binds us together in unity; that Spirit, is not from us but from God. That Spirit, I believe, is what speaks through artists – composers, comedians, Thomas Jefferson, even priests and pastors – and it is from God and brings people closer to God.

The people in the church that I was serving found a way individually, and in faith, and corporately to accept all the good that their pastor had done. Incidentally, that Rector later became a Bishop and is doing amazing things. He truly is one of the best pastors that I have known and I take the helpful things that he taught me (and I have learned from his mistakes as well which is a double blessing).

For all of us who have been harmed by people but also have found those people to have made helpful and beautiful things – yes, we can, with God's help, forgive and learn. And, with God's help, we can continue to strive for justice and peace and for a better tomorrow. We can learn from other's mistakes and we can ask for forgiveness when we have harmed and we can offer forgiveness as we have been forgiven. With God's help.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.