

## THOSE PEOPLE

John 4: 5-42

February 27, 2005 SBCC

If those people would only get off their duffs and do something they wouldn't be poor.

Those people are all alcoholics and druggies.

Those people are all slobs. Have you ever been in any of their houses?

You've got to be careful. You can't take chances with those people around.

Have you seen the way those people jerk their kids around? They don't care two cents for them.

Those people are getting what they deserve. After all, God helps those who help themselves.

Those people smell,

Those people probably have AIDS.

Those people make me afraid.

Those people really don't want to be with us anymore than we want to be with them.

Suppose a wild-eyed man – all tattered and torn, dirty and sick looking, smelling of alcohol walked in here on a Sunday morning to worship with us. What would our response be? What if he came to our coffee hour and started gobbling up all the cookies at an alarming rate. What if he went to use the bathroom to wash himself?

What would our response be?

There's Jesus talking with a Samaritan – a Samaritan woman yet – out in broad daylight!  
Do you know how many different men she's been with? She's working on her sixth.  
Jesus has no business talking or doing whatever he's doing with a woman like that!  
Good Jews don't have anything to do with those people.

And Jesus response to this woman was to love her and to reveal to her that he is the Messiah and send her to spread the Good News to the other Samaritans.

What is our response to her?

Jesus, what are you doing going into that cemetery? There's a crazy guy in there. He'll kill you for sure. He's violent. They can't even keep him locked up anymore. There's no help for those

people. You've got to think of yourself. Think of all the good you can do if you don't get yourself killed. It's too risky. Don't go.

And Jesus response was to go and to love him and heal him.

What is our response to him?

Jesus, what are you doing, letting that woman rub your feet – with her hair yet. Don't you know who she is? Don't you know how she got the money to buy that ointment? She's one of those women. She's a prostitute. She might have all kinds of diseases and she certainly doesn't deserve anything from you. You're too good to have anything to do with her. Besides you're embarrassing Simon, your host. Can't you see how uncomfortable you're making him? And you certainly don't want to offend Simon. He's in a position to do you a lot of good.

And Jesus' response to her was to love her and to forgive her sins.

What is our response to her?

There is usually some truth in the stereotypes we lay on people. There are lots of mentally ill people wandering the streets of our cities and there are lots of people who are violent in our society. They can be scary – and yes, I've been scared too. There are lots of people who don't know how to keep a house or raise children and, God knows, there's a frightening epidemic of substance abusers. But we do a great disservice to "those people" and to ourselves when we are quick to apply stereotypes to whole groups of people and to label and condemn. "Judge not, and you will not be judged," says Jesus. "Condemn not and you will not be condemned," says Jesus. "Forgive and you will be forgiven," says Jesus.

When we label and condemn we not only curry God's displeasure but we lose out on the chance to know the real people who live behind the stereotypes. We lose the opportunity to recognize others as our sisters and brothers in Christ – perhaps even the opportunity to meet Christ himself. And we lose the opportunity to love others and in loving to receive love in return.

Let me tell you a story to show you what I mean. Most of you probably know by now that when I was in Lansing from the mid-eighties to the mid- nineties I was the director of Advent House Ministries. One of the things we did there was to run a weekend day shelter because homeless folks had nowhere to go during the weekend days. Lots of other folks from all over the city came too because we served breakfast, lunch and dinner, all free.

Before Ed and I were married, I guess it must have been while we were dating, Ed agreed to take over the role of volunteer coordinator for the shelter. Somewhere on one of the lists of volunteers he found the name of Jerry Morris and his phone number, so he called and signed him up to come and work at Advent House the following Saturday.

Well, I knew Jerry Morris. He was one of our more or less regular Advent House guests, a large older man, slow-moving and slow-witted. I knew him to be an alcoholic. When Ed told me who he'd signed up to work I laughed and said "I bet you he'll never show up. He's just an old

drunk, and even if he does come he won't be any good. (Now if you think I don't fall into the labeling trap, think again.)

Somehow Ed believed in this man, and he believed he'd come, or maybe he just didn't want me to prove him wrong. Jerry didn't come, or course, and I couldn't resist saying in my self-righteousness, "I told you so."

But Jerry did show up in the middle of next week, and Ed patiently explained that it was on Saturdays, not weekdays. Jerry promised to come the next Saturday.

Somewhere in the course of their conversation Ed found out that Jerry was soon to celebrate his sixtieth birthday. Ed decided to have our Advent House bakers make him a birthday cake which he'd give to him on Saturday. "I'll bet he doesn't show" I said. Sure enough he didn't. By this time, Ed was angry with him, but not willing to write him off, so he called Jerry and told him he'd missed out on having a birthday cake by not coming.

A few days later, Jerry showed up to pick up his by then stale birthday cake. He was delighted, but he left right away. I was sure that was the last we'd see of him. I was wrong.

Jerry showed up the following Saturday and he showed up every Saturday after that for the two or three years until he died. After some initial trial and error with several tasks he decided that his job was to empty the trash – which at Advent House is a big job. And heaven help anyone who tried to step on his turf by helping. Taking out the trash was Jerry's job. He did a good job and he knew he did a good job. He had acquired a place, a niche in our community and people knew who he was. He was no longer one of "those people" – he was a real person. And to the day he died he talked about the birthday cake and how no one ever did that for him before. I'd never have given him a chance because I'd stuck a label on him. I'd made him one of "those people" and hadn't seen the person inside who would respond to being treated with dignity and respect.

There's a whole host of reasons, I suspect, why we need to label and judge and condemn the others of God's children who are different from us. Let me suggest a few.

First, there is selfishness, greed and laziness and all that blatantly sinful stuff. If we recognize others as persons of equal worth then we'd probably have to wonder why we have so much and they have so little and we might be called to give up some of our money, or not buy ourselves so many toys, or worse yet, we might have to give up our time to help and look for ways of eliminating the causes of poverty and illness and violence and substance abuse. "Give to everyone who begs from you," says Jesus, "and of one who takes away your goods do not ask them again. And as you wish that people would do to you, so do to them."

Another reason we need to lay on the stereotype by way of making excuses for our inaction, is fear – plain, cold, out and out fear. We are afraid of anything and anyone different. The known is good, the unknown is bad. We're afraid for our physical safety and perhaps, even more, we're afraid we'll say or do something wrong and be embarrassed.

When the disciples came and found Jesus with the Samaritan woman, I suspect their dominant emotion was embarrassment. They were afraid someone would see Jesus with her and they were afraid it would hurt his image. They may also have been afraid they would have to interact with her. Fortunately they had the good sense not to say anything. But Jesus wasn't uncomfortable or embarrassed because he saw the woman as the person she was. He saw her shame and guilt and sadness. Because he saw her as a whole person he could love her.

Judge not, condemn not, forgive and give, says Jesus, "for the measure you give will be the measure you give back."

A final reason, although I am sure there are others, for our need to label and condemn is that to see "those people" as real persons means that we have to see their pain, and we have to feel their pain, and that puts in touch with our own pain and that hurts. And lots of times there's not a thing in the world we can do to make someone else's pain go away, and that hurts even more. It suggests to us that our hurts might not go away. And we work terribly hard to try and cover up our pain and not to recognize it.

"Blessed are you that weep now," says Jesus, "for you shall laugh" and "woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep."

Jesus calls us to suffer with the poor, to suffer the mentally ill as well as the physically ill, to suffer with the criminal and the addicts, and victims of domestic abuse and of incest, with AIDS victims. Jesus calls us to suffer with him and we do it by suffering with "those people."

Michael Christensen, an urban minister in San Francisco learned something of how we suffer with Christ when he went to spend some time with Mother Theresa in Calcutta a few years before she died. Christiansen was shocked and repulsed by the suffering he saw there. In his book, *City Streets, City People*, Christiansen says, "Everywhere I turned I was confronted with extreme disease and poverty. A half million sleep on the streets; thousands of the destitute on the threshold of death can be found near the train stations and under Howrah Bridge. Live infants are sometimes thrown into trash cans, lepers are tossed into gutters, and aging parents, rejected by their children, are left to die alone."

Michael was not prepared for such poverty and he wanted to flee, to freak out in the face of suffering.

After mass one morning, Michael broke down and told Mother Theresa what he was experiencing.

Did you see Jesus? Asked Mother Theresa. Michael couldn't say that he had. All he'd seen was suffering, disease and death.

"When we love the poor," mother Theresa said, "we do not first see the poor; we first see Jesus! We are not social workers, but missionaries of Christ's love. We do it for Jesus! And when we pick a body off the street and nurture him back to health, we do it to Jesus! It is his face we see in the faces of the poorest of the poor."

Mother Theresa took Michael's hand in hers and said, "The gospel is written on your fingers." She slowly pointed to each of his five fingers and said, carefully emphasizing each word, "You-did-it-to-me."

She brought Michael's five fingers together and said, "See the five wounds of Jesus?" Michael thought about the two wounds in his hands, the two in his feet, and the one wound in his side. Putting his pointed fingers into the palm of her hand, she said softly: "This is his love for you."

"Now close your fist," she said, "This is the sacred heart of Jesus that says to us: 'When I was hungry, you gave me to eat: when I was thirsty you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in, naked and you clothed me: I was sick and you visited me.'" "And at the end of your life," she added, "your five fingers will excuse you or accuse you of doing it unto the least of these, 'You-did-it-to-me!'"