

Living as a Connector

Based on Acts 9:1-19

January 20, 2008

Opening story: My neighbor and the mysterious brush pile.

This is an example of what I'll call "The Spirit of Judgment. The spirit of judgment runs deep in the human heart, rupturing friendships, marriages, families, schools and communities, nations and the whole world. When I use the phrase "spirit of judgment" I'm not referring to the ability to make moral distinctions between truth and error, right and wrong, good and evil. The spirit of judgment refers to our tendency to make assumptions, draw conclusions and then permanently place people in a box based on our conclusions. We slam the lid shut, slap a label on the box and tell people to never leave our box of judgment against them.

These judgments are quite powerful. They can even last for generations. So, for instance, a mother tells her son, "You're no good; you'll never amount to anything and you'll never change" she has placed him in a judgment box. Now the son at least half-believes it: "I am no good," he tells himself, "at least, I might be." So he stays in the box. Then he turns around and passes the same message to his children, or friends or his co-workers or to his church. The spirit of judgment has a life of its own. It's powerful and it cripples the human spirit and destroys loving relationships.

But in this Bible story we find the antidote to the spirit of judgment. It's not just squishy, passive tolerance that ignores hurt and anger and even moral evil. As we'll see in this story, true Christ-like acceptance generates power. It not only breaks the lid of the judgment box, it also gives power so people can change and grow. True acceptance leads to permanent life-change. In this passage we meet two people who live with a spirit of judgment – one is a follower of Jesus and the other is not. Both of them have consigned people to their own judgment boxes. Both of them will be profoundly and permanently changed by the power of Jesus Christ.

First, there's a man named Saul. We know him today as Paul or the Apostle Paul, the man who wrote a good chunk of the New Testament and had a profound impact on spreading the Good News of Jesus throughout the world. Of course he didn't start out as a follower of Jesus. He was not only indifferent to Jesus; he had consigned followers of Jesus to his judgment box: in his mind, they were not only wrong; they were also stupid and dangerous. Notice verse 1: "Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." He exhales and inhales a spirit of judgment.

In Paul's life we see a profound truth about judgment: judgment isn't just an attitude; it's always connected to our behavior. In other words, we treat people differently because of the judgments we make about them. We can't help it. On the one hand, it could lead to ignoring people: I won't talk to him because he's Hispanic or she drives a Mercedes or he's a pompous jerk. Or it could lead to outright persecution and violence: the verbal

violence of putdowns and cutting remarks; or the physical violence of control, abuse, racism and genocide.

So in verse 2 we read that Paul's spirit of judgment moved beyond attitudes to actions: "he went to the high priest and asked for letters ... so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem." This verse reveals the process of judgments: judgments form attitudes; attitudes lead to actions; finally, actions shape our commitments. For Paul that meant that he was intent on one thing: rounding up followers of the Way (Christians were seldom called Christians in the New Testament; they were more often called followers of the Way). Now notice how sneaky and deceptive our judgments are: Paul thinks he's doing the right thing. He thinks he's doing all of this for God. Here we see the deceptiveness of our judgment boxes: we assume they are not only right but also pleasing to God. We assume that God endorses all of our judgments against other people.

But along the path he's going to face a major interruption/roadblock: God. Jesus will dismantle his life – including all his deep-seated judgments - and then reassemble it. This is a story about the power of acceptance, the unconditional love of Jesus the Savior of the world. This is a story about Jesus pursuing and changing and accepting Paul before he was even close to being acceptable. That's the nature of true acceptance: it loves and continues to love even before people achieve our level of acceptability. And that acceptance provides the ground for people to grow and be transformed.

Here's the story of Paul: on the way to Damascus, while Paul was marching down the road with his letters in hand, seeking to round up some troublemakers and haul them off to jail, we read "a light from heaven flashed around him" and he fell to the ground. Then Paul heard a voice say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "I am Jesus," the voice says, "the one you are persecuting." Did you notice how Jesus makes judgments (because Paul *was* persecuting the church), but he doesn't develop a spirit of judgment; he doesn't consign Paul to a box of conclusions and assumptions. The guys who were traveling with Paul are utterly "speechless," gaping with their mouths wide open. Saul picks himself up off the ground but he could see nothing. Then we have a very powerful sentence: "So they led him by the hand into Damascus." Wow, here's Saul, the man who is always in charge, the man whose life-focus was set, his mission resolved, his focus clear, his destiny controlled. But now look at him: his friends have to lead him by the hand into the city of Damascus. For the rest of his life Paul will cling to a spirituality of vulnerability. In other words, he will say over and over again that God often works in and through not primarily our strengths but our weaknesses.

It happens to all of us eventually. When we're young we think – no, we know – that we can conquer the world, we can fulfill our dreams, we can control our destiny. Richard Rohr calls this the journey of ascent. According to Rohr, most of us, especially men, have to make this journey of ascent. It's a steep climb but we have to prove ourselves; we have to show that we have what it takes. For most men this journey of ascent is necessary, but it's also painful – to us and to others around us. On our way up the ascent we often forget about others around us, and we ignore our blind spots, and we consign all

kinds of people to judgment boxes. And then somewhere we hit a wall of suffering or failure or defeat – perhaps in the form of an illness or depression or family problems or a job setback or children who are hurting or a painful relationship – and we realize that we can't go any higher. At that point it feels like our lives are falling apart – and in a sense, they are. Like Paul in this story, God is dismantling the world as we know it. But God is also leading us into something better.

How in the world did this violent opponent of the Christian faith wind up becoming its most famous defender? Paul was NOT looking for this. The answer is found in one word: acceptance - or we could use the more biblical-theological word: grace. Grace doesn't just mean a passive, squishy tolerance. Nor is it an angry forceful thing that gets you to change but it does violence to your soul or your body in the process. Acceptance or grace refers to the undeserved and unsought-after favor of God. Paul was looking everywhere but up to Jesus. But acceptance means that Jesus found him. Later in his life, Paul described it this way: Christ took hold of me, or literally, he seized me (Philippians 3:12). So as Paul was pursuing followers of Jesus, Jesus was pursuing Paul. Did Paul decide for Christ? Absolutely not. Christ decided for him and chose him. Paul could never get over that. So he kept repeating in his letters the idea that he had been chosen (see Ephesians 1:4). As Paul was relentlessly going in the opposite direction, Jesus was relentlessly pursuing and then choosing Paul. For Paul and for every follower of Jesus this was a core truth: before we choose Jesus or accepted Jesus, he chose us.

C.S. Lewis described his journey to Christ in the same way. Sensing Jesus' relentless pursuit of him, he likens Jesus to "the great Angler" playing his fish, to a cat chasing a mouse, to a pack of hounds closing in on a fox, and finally to a divine chess player maneuvering him into the most disadvantageous positions until he concedes "checkmate." Later in his life, Lewis would comment that this demonstrates not just God's power to overwhelm us, but his humble love that woos us. After all, God accepts us even as we fight against him, resist him, don't want him, reject him. He still takes us.

Now notice verse 10 – because as Jesus is working on (or working over) Paul there's a quiet, humble follower of Jesus who also has his judgment box. God's going to work on him as well. Verse 10 says, "In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias." Don't you love Ananias' simple, clear response: "Yes, Lord." He's ready. "Give me anything, God," he seems to say. "I can take on any challenge; just lay it on me." Okay, God says, here's the challenge and the assignment: read verse 11. All of a sudden Ananias changes his mind: Yes, Lord quickly becomes No, Lord. Why does he balk at the assignment? Because he already has Paul consigned to a judgment box; he's slapped on the label and he doesn't want Paul to get out. So in verse 12 he says, "I have heard many reports about him and all the harm he has done to the saints in Jerusalem." Did you notice again the deception behind our spirit of judgment? Ananias tells God that he has Paul in a box but its only for the sake of others. "And he has come here ... to arrest all who call on your name." Yep, Ananias has Paul in a box too and he won't let him out – even if it means disobeying God! Do you see how deeply-entrenched this spirit of judgment is? Most of us would rather disobey God than let people out of our judgment boxes.

What does God tell Ananias? Note the first word: “GO!” Ouch. God is definitely a New Yorker. We were never that direct in Minnesota. In other words, God doesn’t say, “Gee, I sure sense that this is too hard for you. So let’s go with your opinions on this one, buddy.” Instead, God more or less says, “Thanks for sharing your opinion; but do you want your judgment box or do you want me?”

Then God continues by saying, “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name ...” What? This man is your chosen instrument?! Are you kidding! Are you crazy, God? Do I need to tell you that who this man is? He is a persecutor and a violent man? He can’t change. He’s stuck in his box – we put him in there; we slapped the label on him; we closed the lid and we don’t want to let him out.

Do you know why the spirit of judgment is so wrong for a follower of Jesus? We can prove how wrong it is by using two huge theological words: (1) Creation and (2) Redemption. Creation refers to God’s creative power in making us in our image – and the fact that none of us are exactly alike. Each of us, like God, contains depth and mystery and wonder. You are a particular person. You are unlike anyone else on this planet. Made in God’s image, you are a wonder beyond my comprehension. So every time I think, “Yea, I got him figured out: he’s a white, middle-class, middle-age guy with father issues and a penchant for people-pleasing so I completely understand me,” – every time you think you have me all figured out I would say that you have ceased to understand me. Every person you meet contains a pool of deep mystery that you could never explore in one lifetime.

Redemption means that you can change – any day actually – because Jesus is alive and well and walking around the planet earth. Listen to what the Bible says about this (Romans 1:16) – “For the Gospel is the power of salvation for everyone who believes.” Did you hear that? The Gospel, the message of the life-death-resurrection and present reality of Jesus isn’t just information; it isn’t just how to be a nice person; it is power – power to change, power to be forgiven, power for a new day, power for a new way to live your life. That’s the heart of the Gospel of Jesus: Jesus can move in your life in surprising and in powerful ways. He can change you. You’re never just stuck in a box. So why should I stick you in a box and shut the lid? Notice the power of the Gospel: Saul, the persecutor of Jesus would become Paul, the instrument of Jesus.

So, after arguing with God, Ananias goes to Paul. First, notice what he calls him – “Brother.” Isn’t that so powerful. Words are powerful in undoing our judgment boxes. Words convey the spirit of judgment or the spirit of acceptance. What do your words convey to others? A spirit of judgment? Remember, I’m not saying we shouldn’t make any judgments, but a spirit of judgment is the tendency to slap labels on people and say that they are beyond redemption – a spirit of judgment will not change anyone. It reinforces the judgment box. Or do your words convey a spirit of acceptance and a real belief in the power of the Gospel to change lives.

Than Ananias not only speaks words but he also touches Paul. Notice verse --. What a powerful picture! Here's Paul with judgments about Ananias and all Christ-followers; and here's Ananias with judgments about Paul and Jesus stands in the middle of them, delivering both of them from their spirit of judgment and changing them through the power of the Gospel.

Now here's the amazing thing about Paul's journey to Christ: God intervened in Paul's life not just for his sake but also for our sake. Let me read from a letter that Paul wrote towards the end of his life. Notice what he said about this amazing encounter with Jesus on the road (see 1 Timothy 1:13): "I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, but I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief." Now I find that statement simply amazing. First, Paul simply, humbly, freely, honestly just admits what he used to be: a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man. But he can honestly say that because those things don't define him anymore. He's a new man in Christ. This is the Gospel, brothers and sisters. You and I can change. Other people can change. Christ can make them new. If you don't believe that – or if you think you're beyond that or if you've determined that someone else is beyond that – then you've lost your grip on the Gospel. Notice what else Paul could say about his past, "I acted in ignorance and unbelief." I find that so hopeful. We've all done stupid stuff and made huge mistakes with our lives. Do we need to go around beating ourselves up over and over again? No, we can simply say, "Look, it was wrong and stupid, but in Jesus I'm forgiven and I acted in ignorance and unbelief." We don't have to keep judging and condemning others either. We can say, "You know, they were stupid and hard-hearted, but they acted in ignorance and unbelief – just like I have." It's so freeing to let go of all these judgments we make against ourselves and other people. We're always saying, "Well, he should have done that and she should have done it this way and I shouldn't have made a mess out of my life." No, you shouldn't have and they shouldn't have but what good does all those "should-ing" do? Does it help? Does it improve and redeem the situations of your life? No. Let it go. How wonderful if we could release these judgments.

Anyway, Paul goes on to say in verse 14 that the grace of God was poured out on him. Why? For his sake alone? No, notice verse 16 – "For that very reason" – for what reason? – "I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him." In other words, we did Jesus encounter Paul on the road to Damascus and change his life, changing a violent persecutor into a gentle lover and warrior for Christ? Who was it for? It was for you and me. It was so that we could look at this story and say, "Wow, Jesus really does change messed-up sinners all over the world. There's surely hope for me. And there's surely hope for _____ (fill in the blank for someone else in your life) as well.