

“THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE IN THE WORLD...”

9 October 2005

There is a small clay sculpture on the mantel in my living room. The sculpture depicts me in the pulpit, and is accurate down to the bald spot on the back of my head. Zach Pearson is the artist. He made this mini-me about seven years ago. I treasure it, and I call it “The Sermonator,” which was Zach’s nickname for me.

Zach is a senior in high school now. He graduates from the Meeting School, a small, a *very* small, private Quaker school in Rindge, New Hampshire next spring. I was the one who recommended the school to his mother, Jamie Parker, so I’m glad it’s worked out and that Zach has been happy there. He has certainly come of age. I would say that he has become himself. But I do “have a concern,” as the Quakers say. Jamie told me Zach was thinking about going to seminary some day. When Freddie Buechner was about to enter seminary, a woman remarked “I hear you are entering the ministry. Was it your own idea, or were you poorly advised?”

No one should become a minister unless he or she cannot avoid becoming a minister. I ran from my call to ministry as fast and as far and as long as I could until I realized that even though I thought I was running away from ministry, I was always running toward it. And my running stopped here, ten years ago this weekend. Oh, I assure you, I still run away from ministry, but now I am running in place.

This is the best job I have ever had, and the worst, too, which is why I know it’s the right job. And that brings me to the sermon, which was suggested by Zach Pearson. I have told you of that episode of the British comedy, “The Vicar of Dibley,” when the

vicar, struggling to write her sermon on Christmas Eve, shakes her fist at a painting of Jesus and says, “Look here, birthday boy. Some hard facts. It’s the biggest gig of the year. It’s a one-woman show. There are twelve hours to go. And I don’t have a single idea. Help me!”

I have the same problem Geraldine Granger had every Christmas, and every Easter, and every year on my anniversary. I get so self-conscious and anxious I can never think of anything to say. So this week when Zach called to say he would be in church today, I saw a way out. I asked him what he wanted me to talk about in my sermon. He called back the following day with not one, not two, but seven different ideas. We discussed them for an hour, and I settled on two that I could weave together.

As I have re-read some of my sermons, I have discovered that I often use this pulpit as if it were the gun turret of an army tank. If I don’t like something or someone, if something or someone is getting to me, I set them up and then I take them down and I take great delight in doing so. Ready. Aim. Fire. You know the usual targets --- SUVs, evangelical Christians, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, George Bush, the war in Iraq, people who are not as generous as they could be or they should be, people who think community is a commodity, not something you build but something you buy, people who refuse to change, people who don’t like gays or lesbians or dogs, and anyone who thinks being a Christian means you can’t laugh, drink, smoke, ride a Harley-Davidson, have a tattoo, or enjoy sex, particularly if you do all these things at the same time.

I’m like Bartleby, the avenging angel in Kevin Smith’s movie “Dogma.” It gives me pleasure to point out what I see as other people’s sins, insufficiencies, and indifference.

I apologize to you for doing this.

I learned how at the small Baptist church my parents sent me to when I was a child. My Sunday School teachers there taught me who to hate and what to hate, and that this is what God expected me to do. Now, I've switched targets. I defend everyone and everything that church condemned. I turn my guns on the people in that church and everyone like them, and I've added some others.

My parents didn't agree with this church's theology. I seemed to enjoy Sunday School and youth group and that was more important to them than what I learned in Sunday School or youth group. I encourage you to avoid making the same mistake. Some parents here have told me that their children have more fun at other churches than at this one. I'm sorry, but this is not the most important consideration in your child's religious education. That said, while I believe totally in the theological perspectives that drive religious education in our church, I agree completely that our children and young people do not have enough fun here. You are members of this church. I hope that you value this community and what it teaches our children enough so that if something needs to happen, you will choose to stay and make it happen, rather than become, as Rumi expressed it, a spiritual window shopper. This is how community is built and nurtured. It's not easy, and it's not cheap. But nothing about faith and spirituality is. If you've been taught otherwise, "you've been taught what's not the case."

"There he goes again." Yes, there I go again. Did you notice? I turned the guns. I fired. At you.

Why do I do this? I can't blame it all on the Baptists. You see, it's how I learned to defend myself when I was a child. I was different. I was "other." I still am. If I seem from time to time to bite the very hands that feed me and take Bolton to task from the pulpit or in print, it's because occasionally I feel "other" here and I have never liked that feeling. I am single. I don't have two children and

another on the way. I don't have a six-figure income. I don't drive a new car. I don't own one home, let alone two. My circumstances are quite different than those of the majority of people in this town and in this church. There is a great deal you and I do not share. What do we share? The promises I made to you when I became your minister and the promises you made to me and the experiences we have because of that voluntary covenant that bind us together, that, and the love of Jesus.

When you are different, when you are "other," and it shames you and you feel vulnerable and jealous, one of the ways you protect yourself is by rejecting others before they have the chance to reject you. You demean or demonize them. You find a reason and a way to make everyone and everything that threatens you "other." And when you make them "other," you can turn the guns and fire at will. Religion all too often supplies the reason and the way and whispers the command.

When I was in Maine in September, I had dinner with friends who are a liberal and as Unitarian as anyone could possibly be. The other guest was from Texas. Have I given you enough information? You will be surprised to know that he and I agreed about something. I suggested that while "us" liberals condemn intolerance, we are themselves intolerant. My host's eyes bulged and the guest from Texas smiled. "We are intolerant," I said, "of anyone we think is intolerant." One of my hosts did not agree. "I am not intolerant," she fairly shouted. "Are you saying I am intolerant?" "Let me put it this way," I said, "if Pat Robertson started attending your church, would you welcome him, and let him say what he thinks?" "Pat Robertson would never attend my church," she replied.

Well, that's one answer. But if the truth be told, liberals make people "other," too.

The title of this sermon is drawn from a saying of Don Marquis. “There are two kinds of people in the world; those who divide people into two kinds of people, and those who don’t.”

I plead guilty to the former, but I aspire to the latter. And this is, I think, what Jesus wants us to do.

What does the bumper sticker say? “I love Jesus. It’s his friends I have a problem with.”

Jesus would laugh at that. And then he would tell a story like the one about the woman who leavened the bread. Do you know what it means? As far as a Jew was concerned, leaven was just mold, bacteria, a corruption. And Jesus said that’s what his kingdom was like --- it includes even those things we think are bad. Yes, Jesus would laugh, and then he would tell a story like the one about the dishonest steward. The steward cheated his master to protect himself. What did the master do? He complimented the steward and rewarded him. Huh? What happened to an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? And Jesus said that’s what his kingdom was like. It includes even those people we think are bad, and it offers them, and us, grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

Jesus did not look at things the way we do. We put this over here, and that over there. We decide who’s right and who’s wrong, who’s good and who’s bad, what’s holy and what is untouchable, whom to love and whom to hate, whom to forgive and on whom to take revenge, especially today, at a time when so many of the people with the loudest voices in our culture see the world and people as either black or white. This is dualism --- the inability or the refusal to see the linkage between things, to see apparently different things as actually being the same thing, to see ourselves and each other and the world as whole.

Why do we do this? Perhaps it’s because we find ourselves still stuck on Santa’s --- or God’s --- list of who’s naughty and who’s

nice. We were told that we were bad little girls or bad little boys and we still believe it. If we can't accept ourselves, the good and the bad, how can we accept others? If no one has loved us as we are, how can we love others as they are?

Perhaps it's because we have always felt different or "other" and the messages we have received from the world insist that's it's not okay to be other. One way to handle this is to hide in plain site, and try to be the way we believe other people want us to be. As Tom Ripley said, "better to be fake somebody than a real nobody." Another way to handle this is to return fire. On a small scale, this could mean snubbing someone on the soccer field or taking pleasure in spreading the latest story we've heard about someone. On a large scale, it could lead to a Holocaust.

Perhaps it's because we learned in church that it is okay to hate people because God hates them, too. Perhaps it's because we've learned in church that God is someplace way up there and we are someplace way down here and the gap is unbridgeable and we had better be on our best behavior and find a way or a person who will bridge that gap.

And Jesus said, "I and the Father are one. And Jesus said, the kingdom of God is within you" --- that means it's within rich people, poor people, well people, sick people, bad people, good people, Karl Rove and Cindy Sheehan, James Dobson and Maureen Dowd, Mitt Romney and Barney Frank, Pope Benedict and the guys on Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, republicans and democrats, liberals and conservatives, protestants and catholics, jews and muslims, hindus and Buddhists, Shiites and Sunnis, and you, and me."

The Mad man in Gibran's poem approached God as master and God said nothing. Then he approached God as creator and God said nothing. Then he approached God as father and God said

nothing. Finally he approached God as a being from whom he was not separated at all. That's when God spoke. That's when God became visible.

The highest form of spiritual consciousness is not to seek union with each other but to understand that we already are one. The highest form of spiritual consciousness is not to seek union with God but to understand that we have never been separated from God.

I will get there, probably, when I realize I already am there, and so will you.