



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover”

Luke 7:1-10

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Don’t judge a book by its cover. I’m sure you’ve heard that expression before.

I don’t. I don’t judge books by their covers.

I’ve learned not to pay too much attention to the design of the book cover or the promotional quotes on the flyleaf. I do, however, judge a book based on the first chapter. It’s a thing these days, if you have a Kindle or other electronic reader. I see a book I may want to read but I’m not sure I want to invest the time and money. So I click on “send sample chapter.” I read the first chapter and then make an informed decision.

I don’t judge books by their covers. I do judge people by their covers. I try not to but I know I do. We all do. We make judgments based on how people look, how they dress, how they talk, where they live, what kind of work they do. We do it all the time.

Once I went to a lecture by a distinguished and accomplished theologian. He was speaking to a small group, invitation only. As we ministers gathered before the lecture for wine and cheese, we all stood in little circles and greeted each other and engaged in the usual shoptalk. Everyone was talking to someone except for this one rumpled little man who sat in the corner gorging on cheese and crackers. Twenty minutes passed and not one person spoke to him. Yes, you guessed it; the man that we all ignored was the man we had all come to hear. As he stood to speak, brushing crumbs off his stained vest, I had the uneasy feeling that just as we earlier had judged him, he was now judging us.

The fact is we make judgments about people all the time.

- Is that woman in the next lane going to cut me off?
- Is that man worth taking the time to get to know?
- Is this person a threat to me?
- Is that a person who can help me reach my goal?

We make judgements about others all the time. Speaking of making judgments, the Southern Baptist Convention held its annual meeting last week in Birmingham, Alabama. The number one item on the agenda was addressing the emerging sexual-abuse crisis in the denomination. In recent years, dozens of Southern Baptist women have come forward with stories of clergy misconduct and of church officials failing to respond. Earlier this year, two Texas newspapers reported that nearly 400 male Southern Baptist leaders or volunteers have been accused of sexual misconduct over the past 20 years, involving more than 700 victims. New revelations continue to emerge.¹

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/10/731405246/southern-baptists-to-confront-sexual-abuse-and-the-role-of-women-in-the-church>

I have to say that I wasn't all that surprised by any of this. Here is a denomination that teaches that only men can be pastors. And there is very little accountability built into their system. Churches and pastors are very autonomous. That's a bad mix when it comes to sexual misconduct. So, no surprise, they have a problem. That's what they get for rejecting the gifts of women. So, yes, I am very comfortable judging the Southern Baptist book by its cover. In fact, I relish it a bit.

We make judgments about institutions and other people all the time. So, this morning, I readily confess that I am comfortable making a judgment about the central character in today's story: the centurion. I don't like him.

I have my reasons. He's a soldier in the Roman army. The name centurion literally means one in charge of over 100 soldiers. Centurions are the sharp edge of the Roman Empire's power, a cruel force that dominates the people of Israel. Later, this very same empire will order the execution of Jesus.

The centurion has power and authority. He is used to giving orders in the Roman army and having those orders obeyed. He is, then, one of those directly responsible for Israel's oppression.

And to make matters worse, he is a slaveholder. There is no way around this fact. He owns other human beings. This was common in the ancient world but I'm not sure that matters. I am not predisposed to see a slave owner as the hero of the story. I'm comfortable making judgments about centurion slaveholders.

Jesus does not seem to share my comfort. He seems quite willing to give the centurion a chance. It probably shouldn't come as a surprise that Jesus judges people differently than we do. He looks past superficial and obvious and sees more.

In today's story, we learn surprising things about the centurion. He is considered to be a friend to the local Jewish community. The Jewish leaders in his town commend him to Jesus. Just as surprising, the centurion has heard of Jesus and is eager to enlist Jesus' healing power on behalf of his slave.

All of which means he is more complex than perhaps many of his day or ours want him to be. He is a Roman centurion *and* a man who does good for those in his community. He is part of the force occupying and oppressing Israel *and* he builds synagogues for the townspeople under his authority.² He is an owner of slaves *and* he mobilizes a whole community to work on behalf of the health and well-being of one of his slaves.

Jesus sees the centurion for the complicated, complex human being that he is. He sees the centurion's faith and his commitment to seek healing for his slave. Jesus sees all of this and he is amazed.

I have to be honest. I'm disappointed. You see, I want Jesus to take on slavery. I want him to make a speech condemning slavery. Or at the very least liberate the slave in this passage. That's not what happens. That's not what happens. Instead, Jesus is amazed at the faith of the slave owner and heals the slave.

It's not my first choice of an outcome. Which makes me wonder if this story is directed at people like me, who think we know what's what, who think we have figured out what is right and what is wrong, who is right and who is wrong. I'm reminded of something author Anne Lamott once wrote, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."³

Jesus does not hate all the same people we do. I find that very disappointing but, at the end of the day, a good thing. Jesus refuses to reduce people to one attribute or judge someone based on one element of who they are.⁴

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2592>

³ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*.

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2592>

And, we shouldn't either. That's so obvious, right. And so hard to do. It's so hard for us to not judge books by their covers.

Back to the Southern Baptists and their meeting last week. Delegates representing some 47,000 Southern Baptist churches approved an amendment allowing individual churches to be expelled from the Convention if they mishandle or cover up sexual abuse cases. Delegates also established a special committee to evaluate abuse claims against churches. Critics say that the actions don't go far enough to address the crisis but there is no doubt that the Convention has taken a step in the right direction.

And I'm feeling a little less comfortable in my judgment of them. I blame Jesus.

I blame Jesus for challenging my sense of superiority and self-righteousness. I blame Jesus for challenging me to change my behavior - rather than judge my Southern Baptist brothers and sisters I don't know why not support them, pray for them, consider the possibility that they are more complex than I have made them out to be.

Jesus' challenge to us this morning is pretty clear. Don't judge people so quickly. Assume that every person and organization is more than one thing. Read at least one chapter before writing off people and organizations and religious traditions. As we hope and pray that others will give us this same consideration.

My goal in all of this is modest. May we be less surprised that God claims people we have decided are unexpected or unlikely or unworthy. May we be less surprised that God's love and work extend far beyond the confines of what we consider to be good and faithful. May we be less surprised that the God who shows up in a man crucified on a cross regularly shows up where we don't expect God to be.⁵

God claims the unexpected, the unlikely, the unworthy. Which means that God claims us.

Even us.

Amen.

⁵ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2592>