

29th Sun OT (2021)

Mark 10:42-45

Although some people immediately politicized the terrible massacre in Tucson, Arizona, on January 9, 2011 by chalking it up to the vicious rhetoric of conservative right-wingers, the facts have shown that any political motive was entirely absent. The man, the shooter, had no political agenda. He was just plain insane.

But, as one perceptive letter writer in The New York Times (January 13, 2011) wrote, "The real issue is not whether inflammatory political rhetoric caused the Tucson shooting. It's the fact that so many people initially assumed that it did." His point is that our daily, everyday atmosphere is so uncivil and so full of hate that people automatically think that way.

He's right, and that assumption has roots that go from Arizona to New Jersey. Listen: "Four 15-year-old teenage boys were arrested last week and charged with bias intimidation of their female bus driver after crowding around behind her on the ride home from school, making racial slurs, and praising the Ku Klux Klan." Thus began an editorial in my local paper. The editorial goes on to ask, "Where does this kind of hate come from? How is it learned, and who teaches it either directly or indirectly?"

Good question for Christians to ponder. We know that these teenagers were not born prejudiced or threatening; somewhere along the line they must have absorbed these attitudes. From where?

Let's turn to Florida. A community had been hard hit by one of those terrible hurricanes. Power was out, houses were flooded, roads were closed— we all know something of that. At the Red Cross station at the local middle school, a distraught African-American woman asked tearfully for six flashlight batteries.

"My kids are afraid of the dark," she explained.

"Sorry," came the answer. "Only two batteries to a family. However, if you have relatives living with you, you can have two more for each one."

The woman just stood there paralyzed, feeling helpless—when Ryan Abel, who is white, piped up: "I'm a relative."

"So am I," announced a young Asian girl nearby.

The Red Cross worker handed the woman six batteries with a smile. Two incidents, two entirely different attitudes, one stating that we are divided by color, race, and religion, and the other stating that we are united by compassion, concern, and charity; one as far as one can get from the teaching and example of Jesus, the other as close as one can get. If any of those boys were Christian, it would have been a crucifixion all over again.

There are many causes, I suppose, for prejudice, but surely the parents and their attitudes, their casual table talk and example have to be paramount. At least they're there first and have the privileged position of shaping values. It's beautiful when they do so in favor of Jesus. Allow me to illustrate.

Around Christmastime, a man turned nostalgic and wrote of his childhood memories. His father, a man of faith, was a florist in Philadelphia. At Christmastime, he taught his son how to make the wreaths, how to make them carefully and honestly, no corners cut, no putting profit before doing something right, and telling his son, "That's the way God would want you to live."

The man telling the story remembers once working in the back room and seeing Joe Sweeney, a steelworker, coming in, and how proud the man felt when he saw his father hand one of his wreaths to Joe. Then he overheard this conversation:

"I'm a little short," Joe said. "Joe," his dad replied, "pay me when you can."

When his father returned to the back room, the son said, rather hurtfully, "You just gave a wreath away for nothing, and it was one of mine."

He said his father looked him in the eye and said, "You'll learn some day that it isn't the money that counts; in God's eyes, it's the people who count."

Once when he was older the son delivered flowers at Christmastime in his father's old Ford. "What do you want?" asked a sad voice at one house.

"Flowers, Ma'am."

She opened the door slowly, "Who sent them?" She was about 70, bent over with gray, stringy hair.

"There's a card inside the envelope on the package," he said.

She asked him to put the poinsettia on the coffee table, and she opened the envelope and read the card. Her face brightened and she burst into tears.

"It's from my daughter in California. I haven't heard from her in nine years. Bless you, son. Bless you."

She limped over to a desk, opened a drawer, grabbed a \$5 bill and handed to him.

He handed it back, "Please," he said, "use it to call your daughter." When he returned to the shop and told his father about the old woman, his father smiled, reached for his wallet, took out a \$5 bill and gave it to him. The boy had learned his lesson well. His father taught him. It's hard to imagine him shouting racial slurs at anyone.

Do people talk like his dad anymore, saying that doing things right and honestly is the way God would want their children to live, that it's people, not money, that counts? Do we give those kinds of life lessons as a normal gospel way of growing up?

There has to be a reason why two boys turned out differently, one belittling a woman in order to separate people into categories, another handing back a \$5 bill in order to connect a mother and daughter. There has to be a reason why a white man and an Asian woman claimed relationship with a black woman, and why four white teenagers refused a relationship with a black woman.

The reason usually is the people in our lives, the ones who shaped us and taught us by how they lived. I wonder what the home life of those boys was.

Whatever, we're talking Jesus here. We're not talking about believing in him—anybody can do that. That takes no sweat—but following him; you know, the healthy one who touched untouchable lepers, the master who ate with outcast outcasts, the preacher who told tales about a good Samaritan, the prisoner who forgave his enemies, and the Jew who cured the Roman soldier's son. Yes, that one.

Let's pray for those teenagers and the people involved in the Tucson tragedy. But, while we're at it, let's look to ourselves gathered as we are right now as baptized Christians in a Christian church and ask ourselves if being a Christian makes any difference.

Now, in a few moments we will all stand and declare what we believe. That will be the easy part.