

On Assumptions  
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Date: February 21, 2016

14:08

"On Assumptions" Pilgrim Church UCC, Second Sunday in Lent, (Luke 13:31-35) February 21, 2016

The great preacher Fred Craddock was once invited to preach at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta—once Martin Luther King Sr. and Jr.'s church. During his lifetime, Craddock was considered one of the best preachers in America because he introduced a whole new style of preaching. He was known as a storyteller, freely sharing his encounters with God in a folksy, conversational way. Craddock was a soft-spoken man from Tennessee who was actually told in his youth that his voice was too weak to be a preacher. Though he was determined to strengthen his voice, and would go out to a nearby pasture and preach to the cows. Craddock thought that if he could get those cows to raise their heads when he spoke, maybe he would be heard in churches one day.

So Craddock was a soft-spoken Appalachian storyteller preaching to a historic African American congregation in Atlanta on that particular Sunday. During the worship service, Craddock moved to the pulpit ready to read some verses from Mark Chapter 8 and then begin his sermon. Though as he was about to start, the Senior Minister Joe Roberts began to sing, "I feel much better now that I've laid my burden down." Then the Associate Ministers began to sing and the musicians went to their instruments—the piano, the organ, the drums, and the electric guitar and the people began to sing. Craddock realized that he's the one up front, the leader of this part of the worship service, and so he began to clap his hands and sing along himself. At a certain point, Pastor Joe Roberts put his hand out and the congregation got quiet, sitting down to finally hear the scripture and the sermon. After worship, Fred said to Joe, "Well, that kind of shocked me a little bit. You didn't tell me you were going to do that." And Joe's response was that he didn't plan to sing either. He said, "Well, when you stood up there, one of the associates leaned over to me and said, 'That boy's going to need help.'"[1]

Now there are many reasons to appreciate this story. It acknowledges different worship styles and congregational expectations of ministers. It shows how clergy can have each other's backs. Though it also shows how we human beings tend to make assumptions about each other. It's fascinating that one of the associate ministers looked at Fred Craddock about to preach to that congregation and said, "that boy's going to need help." We're talking about one of the best preachers in America in his day, no joke. But his soft-spoken, Appalachian, storytelling preaching style was different than what the good folks at Ebenezer Baptist Church were probably used to hearing. So all sorts of assumptions were at play here. Thankfully Fred Craddock was a humble, down-to-earth man. And Fred and Joe had enough of a relationship (it seems) that no offense was taken.

Our Gospel text for this Second Sunday in Lent also contains some assumptions. Assumptions are when we accept something as true or bound to happen, even if we don't have any proof. People make assumptions all the time. Christians often make assumptions about the various Jewish groups that were around in Jesus' day whenever we hear them mentioned in the Gospels: the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Jesus' movement. If I asked you what you think or remember learning about the Pharisees—chances are you won't be thinking of many positive attributes. We tend to assume that Pharisees are holy rollers, self-righteous, confrontational, maybe even bad based on some Biblical texts. Though this is an over-simplification to say the least, and it can be offensive when we recall that Rabbinic

Judaism traces its roots to the Pharisees. So let's explore the Pharisees a little bit and how making assumptions doesn't always work out so well.

First of all, the Pharisees redefined Judaism in a way that lasted. The Essenes hung out in the desert and the Sadducees were hyper focused on the Temple—neither group lasted. It was the Pharisees who kept the Jewish tradition alive. They established the authority of Oral Torah (teachings and interpretations of traditions that were transmitted orally before eventually being written down) alongside the Written Torah. They opened up observances that were once undertaken exclusively by priests to all people. So whatever their role within Judaism might have been in Jesus' day, the Pharisees were the leaders who redefined Judaism after the devastating destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. They were a popular group in the first century and reinterpreted the scriptures and their Jewish faith in a rapidly changing world. The Pharisees were reformers in their heart of hearts.

It's also worth noting that the Pharisees didn't have a ton of power when Jesus was going about his ministry. The Pharisees were not part of the governing class and were competing for power and influence within Judaism. All of the Passion narratives agree that when Jesus was crucified it was the Romans who were calling the shots alongside the chief priests and the scribes. The Sadducees had the power—they were the ones influencing the Romans to execute Jesus as a political insurrectionist. The Pharisees weren't in power. Our Christian Gospels (most notably Matthew's Gospel) that have some hostilities toward the Pharisees were influenced by what happened after 70 C.E for the most part. Because then it was the Pharisees and the Jews of the Jesus Movement who were competing for power within Judaism.[2] It would be like writing down stories at the height of a family fight when sometimes we may say something that we wish we could take back. Once more and more Gentiles began following in the Way of Jesus, the separation between Judaism and Christianity became complete.

It's really important that we don't paint all Pharisees as self-righteous, hypocritical, bad holy rollers even though there's some of that sentiment in the Gospels. It's important because it has contributed to Christians making all sorts of false assumptions about Judaism. The Law is bad and grace is good for instance. Thankfully Luke's Gospel (my favorite Gospel) presents a more nuanced view of the Pharisees. For instance, how do we understand some Pharisees coming up to Jesus and saying to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you"?[3] That's right, it's a group of Pharisees who warn Jesus that his teachings are going to get him killed.

Scholars are quick to say that Luke's presentation of Pharisees is puzzling, inconsistent, and complicated. Sometimes the Pharisees do grumble at Jesus' disciples about table fellowship and Jesus himself calls them hypocrites. But today we encounter Pharisees warning Jesus about Herod wanting to kill him. Should we take this as a friendly gesture or some Pharisees trying to derail Jesus from his mission?[4] I'm going with some Pharisees befriending Jesus and warning him out of compassion and real concern for his life. Luke distinguishes among the Pharisees by often adding "some" Pharisees to the text. Translation: don't paint this group within Judaism with such a broad brush.

This is an important reminder in our political atmosphere these days. It would be like saying all poor people are lazy. All Muslims are terrorists. All African American men are criminals. All Latinos are here illegally. What a sad state of affairs when people make those kinds of sweeping assumptions. This is the way political rhetoric sometimes sounds right now. And it's incredibly disturbing when we categorize people in these terribly offensive ways.

We can appreciate this story about some Pharisees coming up to Jesus as his friends and warning him to be careful. Because it's a good reminder that just as we can't assume the Pharisees and Jesus were always at odds with each other, we can't assume that stereotypes

about groups of people are necessarily true. As if there's not diversity. As if people aren't full of surprises. As if we can predict friendships so easily.

After Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia died, one of the most moving tributes came from his friend and fellow Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In the midst of all the political maneuverings about who will nominate a new Justice and when, Ginsburg remembered Scalia as her best buddy. These two Justices were famously the leading conservative and liberal voices of the Court. Scalia long argued that the Constitution is dead (so to speak), that it means exactly what it was meant to mean at the time our Founding Fathers wrote it and states adopted it by 1790. Ginsburg argues that the Constitution is living and meant to adapt to the times. Ginsburg would argue that Scalia's originalist approach wasn't faithful to the idea of "We the People." Since the Constitution has to expand to cover more than white, property-owning men who were once "We the People." The two of them would argue back and forth and yet they were true friends. Scalia once said of Ginsburg, "What's not to like—except her views on the law?"<sup>[5]</sup> If we were to make assumptions, we may have assumed that Scalia and Ginsburg would be bitter enemies. After all, they were polar opposites as Supreme Court Justices. Yet they had a genuine friendship, a friendship Justice Ginsburg is now mourning even in the midst of all the politicking about that vacant seat that will continue in the months ahead.

In the end, assumptions can take many forms. Assuming that because someone is a soft-spoken storyteller, that he won't make much of a preacher. Assuming that people are all the same. Assuming that people can't be friends across differences. There are many more assumptions we could have explored together. We all make assumptions about people we encounter in our lives. And people make assumptions about us. But the next time we jump to assume, remember that some Pharisees went out of their way to warn Jesus of what was to come because maybe some of them had his back. Maybe they were friends even if that's surprising to us. Remember that people can surprise us. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.

[1] Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, Ed. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, 128-129.

[2] Marilyn J. Salmon, *Preaching without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism*, 75-107.

[3] Luke 13:31.

[4] Amy Jill-Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, "Pharisees in Luke" in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation, 110.

[5] Nina Totenberg, "Justice Ginsburg and Scalia: A Perfect Match Except For Their Views on the Law," NPR, February 13, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/02/13/386085342/justice-gins...>