

One of my favorite adages that I've learned recently is this: don't miss the forest for the trees. It's a warning to not focus too much on the smaller details of a situation without considering the larger picture or your surroundings. It's also a comfort to know that there is so much more beyond what we just see when we hyper-focus on the specifics of something, that there is a greater presence and energy and beauty to be found in considering the entirety of a thing.

This adage is often used in mental health therapy, in helping people get out of hyper fixating or ruminating thoughts, that the small things we focus on, like did I say the right thing? Or creating fake arguments in your head with someone trying to consider every angle before interacting with them. Or spiraling downward into negative thoughts or unhelpful patterns that aren't true or helpful in your mind.

These smaller things are not as important as looking beyond, looking up, looking around what immediately captures our attention. Realize that the person you're arguing with in your head has so much more to them than just that one interaction, relationship, or viewpoint that you don't agree with or like. Realize that there is so much more to the way you present to others and to the relationships you have with people than just one awkward moment or conversation. Realize that there is so much more in the world and in life itself than just the negative thoughts that threaten to hold you captive. There is light and life and love to be found by the steadfast promises of our loving creator God. That light and love and life is indeed the forest, the bigger picture, the surrounding hope and joy of Christ that has the power to reorient and save us each and every day.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus calls out the Pharisees for focusing on the minutiae of the law, and not on the ministry and work and character of the disciples who have chosen to follow him. Jesus calls out their hypocrisy, of focusing on the trees of law minutiae rather than the forest of living in the promises, prophecies, and commandments of God, rooted in love for God and for people. Jesus calls us all to live in this abundant forest, of God's commandments, God's love, the light of Jesus himself, in order to truly live and to indeed create a more faithful, loving community with one another.

How often do we nit-pick at the small details of things, rather than deal with the larger, truer issues at hand? How easy is it for us to call out the small things we think we can and should control or change about others, rather than work together for greater change? For a greater sense of community, love, and understanding among one another?

Isn't it easy to call out the sins of others, rather than turn our voice inward to examine our own shortcomings or ways we've caused hurt?

There will always be situations in which people do things so egregious that are beyond our own personal forgiving, and fortunately God in Jesus Christ is greater than any of us, to extend that forgiveness to others that we cannot muster.

But what Jesus calls us to, and indeed instructs us on in today's Gospel lesson, is that this internal work for ourselves is what is deeply needed in order for healing to happen. Jesus tells us that these things that defile come from within - it's not the outward influence but the internal choices that predicate these hurtful things. It's easier to blame the outward influence than it is to do the internal work of orienting more closely to God, our creator who desires love and new life for us all. Who desires the goodness of creation to prevail in the world. For sinfulness to be cast out in powerful love. For the kingdom of God to indeed come nearer.

We may see bad things or sinful things happen in our world, and we may experience these difficult things too. But it's about how we deal with it, how we choose to respond, that makes the world of difference. If you take the pain and hurt and sinfulness of this world and allow it to fester into something harmful or painful within you, it will likely unintentionally or intentionally continue to cause harm. We cannot control the actions and thoughts and behaviors of other people. But we can control our reactions, how we interact with others, our internal selves, which lead to goodness and love in the way we live.

And there certainly, by the love and grace of God, is another way to stop this cycle of hurt and pain in the world. And the way to stop it is having the courage and strength to accept the commandment of God's love, to look inward and change your own behaviors in order to spread this life-saving, God-given love and goodness into the world. The commandment of God that Jesus refers to in the Gospel today is indeed the commandment of love. To love God above all else, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Sometimes we cannot control the bad or harmful things that happen to us because of others or simply the circumstances we are born into. When we experience hurt or trauma in our lives, especially when we are young, we do what we need to in order to survive. And sometimes these survival tactics turn into unhelpful coping behaviors or thought patterns. The place you start from with these means of surviving is not your fault.

But the gift that comes from the life given to us by God is that you are never stuck in those patterns, those maladaptive things you once needed in order to survive. You never have to navigate these changes by yourself. God is with you and holds you closely in every step of your journey, especially in the moments when it seems hardest and the most painful. Jesus knows deeply of what it is to be human, to be the recipient of others' vitriol and hurt and indeed torture and pain at the hands of his own people. Through it all, the Holy Spirit is moving within and around you, and our God of love who created the world and called it very good, come right alongside you.

And though Jesus is not subtle in what he tells us are the outcomes of holding onto internal pain and the things that defile us from festering internally, Jesus also gives us hope and a path for releasing these hurtful things. That hope comes from God. That path is following God's commandments, to love God and neighbors above all else. Understanding our own belovedness, the commandments and promises of God given to each and every one of us is what can and will heal so much of the pain we hold inside. Accepting the love God gives us and giving love to one another, not giving up on the other person, showing the light and life we've

been given in our interactions with each other is how we begin to heal these defiling things that can hold us captive.

Jesus encourages and teaches us to live by God's commandment, and focus on our internal renewal, not on the things that defile, the things that we say and do that hurt others and ourselves. When we find ourselves focused on the trees, the specific minutiae and things that cause pain to ourselves and others, whether intentionally or unintentionally, I pray, dear friends, that you will remember the forest instead of the trees. The trees are part of the forest, of course, but there is so much more to life and to being a beloved, created child of God than just these things that threaten to hold us captive. I pray that you will accept the love of God and from that place of love have good courage to do the internal work that shines the light and life of Christ into the world, into your relationships with others, and into the hopeful future that we are promised in Jesus Christ. Take good care, dear friends, and know that our loving, creator, life-saving God is with you in every step of your journey, no matter where it leads. Thanks be to God, Amen.