

Scripture:

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Patron Saint of Good Enough

Judgment. Judgment. Judgment. Who among us doesn't struggle with this... Judging others, judging ourselves, feeling judged, watching and listening to others judge.

I used to have a group of friends that when an awkward moment came up and we could sense it, we would say with a chuckle. "Stop judging me" or even "I'm totally judging you." It may sound harsh but because it was done in a lighthearted fashion it felt refreshing and honest. Truth is probably if there was any real harsh judgment going on we wouldn't have joked about it. What was great about it was it set in all of our minds a catch phrase for if we were actually judging someone and it would stop us in our tracks. On occasion we would even tell each other "don't judge yourself." (It still works in my mind today).

My observation is we live in a very harsh culture of judgement. It is so engrained in our world, that to many it doesn't even give them pause when they are judging others. There is also a whole industry of self-help out there for the many that are their own own harshest critics. Judgment can be toxic but for many of us it is a part of our DNA. We often go to judgment long before we go to grace.

The pandemic hasn't made us softer or gentler. At the beginning many of us (including me) thought it might, or at least we hoped it would. I still hope it will and yet admittedly I feel more ashamed of my naivety.

Sadly, right now with the high levels of anxiety so many are facing I have seen the inclination towards judgment increase.

Judgement for those who are vaccinated and those who are not, judgement for mask wearers and non-mask wearers. Judgement for those who send their kids to school with a sniffle and judgment for those who are anxious about a common cold. Judgement for those who overwork and those who don't work hard enough, judgment for those who are faithful and religious and judgment for those who have no roots in tradition.

Mom groups can be the most judgmental of all - parenting tips, self-help tips, behaviour tips, social media has children being called out for bad behaviour publicly and then on the other hand bad behaviour is defended depending upon the situation and whose child it is.

The truth is that with so much judgement in our world most of us are afraid to live fully because we don't want to make the mistake that others would judge us for. The worst part about that is most of us just long to be loved for who we are mistakes, foibles and all. That is probably why there is a patron saint for every kind of person on the planet. I had not really thought about that much until Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie pointed it out in their book "Good Enough" 40 devotionals for a life of imperfection.

I actually googled it to figure this out and right away what popped up was a Catholic online resource of patron saints listed alphabetically from A-Z. It is true. There is a saint for Abandoned Children and Abdominal pains, for Bachelors and bartenders, for cake-makers and cats all the way to yachtsmen and of course St. Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of Zoo's. Married women your patron saint is Monica and Teachers you can turn to Gregory the Great. Your patron saint is your protector and guide, someone you can turn to when your imposter complex creeps in or when you feel judged by yourself or other.

Bowler tells us a story about St. Rose from thirteenth-century Italy whose "astonishing career as a saint began at age three when she raised her aunt from the dead." (Good Enough, pg. 79) I have no idea what I was accomplishing at three but I can tell you it wasn't nearly as saintly. Now Rose is rare as most saints are because by the age of seven she decided to live an "ascetic lifestyle-taking a vow of poverty, chastity and obedience in her parents house." My six year old wouldn't even know what most of those mean let alone take a vow of them.

Roses' story continues, she nearly died at the age of 10 but was cured. Having been given a second chance at life she believed she was empowered by the "virgin Mary to preach on the streets and public squares with a crucifix in her hand. She earned a fearsome reputation as a prophet," who could apparently also communicate with birds. (I imagine in this day and age she would be less than admired for all of this pious behaviour).

Here is where it gets to the part we might understand a bit better. Rose had one desire. She wanted to join a religious order called the "Poor Clares." The problem was she was actually poor so she could not afford the entrance fee to join the order. Rose "loudly prophesied that the religious order who refused her would regret it after her death, which they did only a few short years later. She died at seventeen.

She's now the patron saint of her hometown, Viterbo, Italy and every year, that town has a procession that honours her and the memory of people who don't fit in. She's known as the saint of exiles. Wanderers. Those refused hospitality by religious communities." I know more than a few who could use a Rose in their corner. In fact probably everyone has had a season of life when they needed Saint Rose.

How can it be that followers of the Jesus way can become communities that ostracize or push people out? We could and would love to claim we are not but all of us have times of holding judgment in a less than Christ-like fashion. For generations churches have left people feeling unwanted due to their sexual identities, their economic status, their family systems, their mental health, their addictions and more. I have heard more stories than you would like to know about people in each of these situations, even here in our church. We wouldn't want to believe it but it has been true.

Often people feel they can't come to the church until they are whole, or until they fit into the mold that church and society expect of them. Which let's be honest for most of us living our true selves and living up to societal expectations are not the same. That is why most of us tell constant lies we can live with like "I'm fine! Or it's for the best! Or This too shall pass." We say these things to make ourselves and others feel better. We know as we say it we don't believe it but it's what we do.

I have a dear friend that is a very high achiever who is laying in a hospital bed right now from a sudden back injury and he can not walk. In one moment he was working and in the next moment

he was being told it would be at least 3-6 months before he could walk. As he shared this news with me he quickly summed up. "But it's okay." Maybe I've been reading too much Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie but I found myself saying "and when it doesn't feel okay you call me, because it doesn't sound okay to me and I'm going to be there with you when it isn't." I don't know if I said the right thing in the moment but I did know "It's okay" was more for me to feel better than for him and I didn't want him to feel he had to do that.

On the same day I spoke with another friend who is going through some really hard things and she said. "I get David and the psalms more than I ever have before." I understand why in one psalm he is praising and in the next he is lamenting, even cursing - sometimes in the same psalm. That is how life feels for me right now. "The psalms are the poems and prayers that express real emotion. They cry out in anger. They rage against their enemies. They ask God for help. They weep and mourn. They blame God for not showing up soon enough.

The psalms remind us that God can take it all. All our anger. All our shock. All our confusion. All our sorrow. All our shame. All our fear. All our grief, There is no need to tie a bow around what we feel or make ourselves more presentable to God. Nothing is off-limits. We can let it all pour out." (Pg. 174 Good Enough)

That is the kind of God our scripture is about today. A son who has been careless with his living, squandering his fathers inheritance until he hits rock bottom. He gets so low he has to go back and beg for help from the family he abandoned. He is so ashamed he does not dare ask for a 'seat at the table' with the family, instead he asks to become a hired hand. And to his surprise, "his extravagant failure is met with extravagant love and grace." I don't know what part of you is feeling unworthy or broken today. I don't know if today you are singing a psalm of lament or a psalm of praise but I do know that God is with you either way. Longing for you to know you are loved and beloved and worthy - even if you can't feel it.

Bowler goes on to say "though the world as we know it has been upended it is right there we can find shelter with God, our refuge. God is our safe place, not after the worst is over or before the other shoe drops. But right in the midst of our pain and grief and loss. God is our place of peace as the world around us rages on...Right in the midst of trouble, God is with you. You are never alone." (Pg. 174)

God desires for us to know this so completely. Whether the struggle we face is our doing, or an unexpected predicament of life most of us can be pretty hard on ourselves when things don't go as planned. Most of us are capable of feeling the guilt, shame, and fear of being seen as a failure even when it isn't deserved. Our imperfect lives can leave us wallowing in the pig pen like the son in our story. We constantly disappoint ourselves for our lack of perfection. Still the truth is, life is a risk every single day and facing whatever each day holds is not only good enough, but worthy of love and grace. We are always worthy, and in God's kingdom we always belong.

But for any of you who have days "when you're feeling particularly left out, forgotten, excluded or exiled, let's remember the prophecy of Saint Rose: "you will miss me." We can take a moment to grieve the loss of not being welcomed and remember that all of the community of faith is impoverished when our gifts and our hopes are sent into exile. Just because we are not always

wanted doesn't mean we don't belong." I am pretty certain the God of extravagant welcome would say come to me I'm here with you.

So I invite you to say different serenity prayer with me.

