

Sermon: Saint Judi

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Scripture: Luke 6:20-31

You all know my fondness for psychology, having studied it for my bachelor's degree. This week, as I prepared for all the things coming up before the end of the year, I was reviewing an article from Psychology today about Soviet Sociocultural Psychologist Lev Vygotsky. His theory of childhood development interests me so much as a pastor who works with the *community* of faith because he talked about how social interaction influences our development. He wrote, "The teacher must adopt the role of facilitator not content provider." The teacher must work with us to help us learn and grow, not just get us to regurgitate facts.

As my kids move through their grade school years, I am struck at the variety of teachers they have been blessed with. Some of them are great for all the obvious reasons, and others stand out for less conventional ones. The best teacher I ever had, wasn't considered a teacher at all, but was a classroom assistant who worked with me during some of the toughest years of my life. When I was in 10th grade, I began exhibiting symptoms of a mysterious illness. I missed months of school, was in constant pain, and could not stay awake for more than an hour or so at a time. I had every lab test imaginable, biopsies, and more specialist visits than I care to remember. Eventually, this illness was diagnosed as "lupus," which most of you have heard me talk about before.

The thing about getting a grown-up illness at a young age is that people aren't sure what to do with you. I had a tutor and a few teachers who came into the house to teach me, sometimes at my bedside. Once I began

treatment for this mystery illness, I made my way back to school, but it was clear that my life would not be the same. Suddenly, the consummate straight A student needed all kinds of help to keep up. I couldn't walk a lot or carry a heavy backpack, so fellow students would walk with me to class, leaving a few minutes early, so that we had extra time to get there. That was one of the easier fixes. We soon also realized that my hands were weak and hurt too much to write. I could borrow notes from someone in class, but I couldn't borrow other students' tests. I needed a new pair of hands, but as bionic hands weren't on the agenda, I had to settle for the substitute hands of a kind lady named Judi More.

I don't remember ever officially meeting "Mrs. More." Somehow, I just always knew her. She was one of those people who, when you meet them, you feel you've known them forever. She had a way about her that immediately put you at ease. Going back to school was scary for me. I didn't know how I was going to make it through the day, let alone how I was going to keep up with my peers. In many ways, I simply couldn't keep up with them and that was where Judi came into the picture. She was my hands when I took my exams. She was calm as I worked out the answer to complex math equations, struggled with multiple choice answers that seemed ambiguous to me, and hemmed and hawed over the scant possibility that I was choosing the wrong word to fill in the blank. I needed extra time on my exams, and Judi was patient throughout it all, even when I sat for the PSATs and twice for the SATs.

It wasn't just me whose life and studies Judi made easier; she cared for all the students of my high school, especially those who needed accommodations, whether they were neurotypical but had physical

disabilities as I did, or were on the autism spectrum. She made us all feel like individuals of worth and treated us all with dignity and respect. One of the things I remember her most for was snacks. I had a hard time eating much at one time, so I would often have little baggies of Apple Jacks or Froot Loops in my bag. Our shared love of those sugary cereals certainly bonded us all the more, so to speak. She became an integral part of my high school experience and kept up with what I did afterward. She was there when I graduated, even popping by my graduation party, partnering with another special teacher of mine to get me a little Palm Pilot to help me type my schedule so that in college I didn't have to write it.

While I know she was a Christian, Judi and I didn't speak often of our faith. That's not something kids typically did at my high school, though some did gather to pray by the flagpole in the morning. The thing about saints like Judi is that there isn't so much the need for talk; her actions spoke louder than words. Theirs is a faith we should emulate. It is the way of Jesus, who showed us how to be, much more than he told us how to be. Judi's faith was visible and didn't necessarily need to be expressed in words.

Luke's gospel lesson today brings us to an appropriate place for All Saints Day as well as for a reflection on visible faith. In this reading, Jesus is delivering his famous "Sermon on the Plain" and our selection today includes what have affectionately become known as "the Beatitudes." This sermon is told twice in scripture. Once in Luke and once in Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew is the preferred version. It's the nice version focused solely on the blessed. Luke's Plain version is less well-loved, and that is because Jesus's words about the blessed are matched point by point with woes. The words often used for such comfort are

there... at the beginning, but Jesus does not stop there. In Matthew, Jesus holds onto the woes until the end—directing them primarily at hypocrites. In Luke, he lays them out in a contrasting format, directing these words of caution at those who follow Jesus—the disciples—the church.

To be blessed in Jesus's meaning is to have a special place in God's heart, and we can see by this point in Luke's gospel that the poor, the hungry, the sad, and the outcast are, indeed, close to the heart of God. As the scriptures say, "God has anointed [Jesus] to bring good news to the poor,... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19). Those who have little comfort or resources to rely on hold a special place in God's heart. Jesus says so right here in Luke chapters 4 and 6.

So then what about the rest of us? Well, that's who the woes are for. They are in part, a warning to all of us who live in relative comfort and security. Even those who live near the poverty line in the West are rich by comparison to those who live well below it in poorer, more desolate parts of the world. According to Luke's Jesus, we who are rich, well-fed, content, and who "fit in" are in a certain kind of jeopardy. The reason is because those of us who become self-sufficient and reliant only on ourselves sometimes think we have less need for God. Or worse, we think God has already blessed us and that means we've got things figured out. That way is not the way of humility to which God calls us, but is the way of the haughty and self-righteous. When this is our mindset and way of living, we must re-evaluate because we're at risk of separating ourselves from God.

When we've got all we need, it is easy for us to think we don't need to trust in God and that shift jeopardizes our very relationship with our creator.

So, what are we to do if we live a comfortable life, but want to serve God? Well, it's clear from Luke's gospel that in the words of E. Elizabeth Johnson, "if [we] want anything to do with Jesus or the God who sent him... [we] had better go find the poor, the hungry, the captives, the blind, the outcast, and join Jesus as Jesus cares for them." She adds, "The way we know *who* Jesus is is to go *where* Jesus is, with the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed."

In other words: the mission is what matters, my friends. This is why mission is the most important thing we do as church. Not converting people to our way, but going into the world and showing them what the love of God looks like through the work of our hands and giving from our hearts. We do a lot of great things, but we can't spend all our time looking at ourselves, our mission is to serve and love others.

Judi passed away peacefully at her home on August 17, 2021, after a battle with cancer. In that moment, the people of Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania and, in my opinion, the entire world, lost a saint who lived among us: someone who lived out the call of Jesus. Her work with me and with other children shines as an example of the best we can hope from those who help us grow. Lev Vygotsky thought, in part, that children grow through what adults convey to them about how to interpret and respond to the world. As I think about Judi More, I know her presence and example had a profound influence on who I became and how I interpret and respond to the world.

At the end of this gospel reading from the lectionary today, Jesus imparts to his disciples what has become known as “the Golden Rule:” do to others as you would have them do to you. If you can do something good for others, you should do it unreservedly just as Jesus taught us and showed us. Judi lived out this rule, following Jesus without preaching a word, treating others as she wanted to be treated. She modeled Jesus’s command to love her neighbor as herself. If we as children learn best from the examples of adults around us, Judi’s stands out as one of the finest examples to ever have lived. On this All Saints Sunday, let us remember those teachers in our lives who, like Saint Judi, encouraged us to be the people Jesus knew we could be, striving to be ever closer to the people God created us to be with the Holy Spirit at our sides. Amen.