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Perhaps you have heard this story before:

There once was a stranger who came into a small town one day and stood in the town square. He was wearing a very strange coat. It was black, and sewn into it were patches of cloth of all sizes, shapes, and colors. As word spread of this strange visitor, the townspeople gathered around in curious silence. Finally a brave soul dared to ask about the significance of the unique coat.

The stranger immediately began to point to different patches and explained that they represented the sins of different people of the town. Embarrassed, some people left the square. Indignant, others shook their heads in denial of the accusations. After explaining every patch and denouncing every sin, the man turned and headed out of town. On his back was a dark patch of cloth that covered almost his entire back. The townspeople wondered out loud what, and whose, sin that patch represented. Suddenly a voice rang out loud and clear; “That represents his own sin, for he is willing to point out the shortcomings of others and yet fails to see his own.”¹

As the Gospel of Matthew puts it, the man overlooked the plank in his own eye to point out the sawdust in his neighbors’ eyes.

I imagine, at some point in our lives or another, most of us have been in a position where we have felt sized up and judged by another. It doesn’t feel good, does it? It can be shaming, in fact, making us feel very small and unworthy. Yet, more and more, our culture, popular and political, seems to be shaping and encouraging us to think and behave like a nation of amateur judges.

There are umpteen reality shows, music and dance competitions, which invite viewers to pick apart participants’ looks, actions, and personalities; their talent or lack thereof. There are the recent political campaigns, which have morphed from respectful debate into something more on the order of a mud slinging contest. There is our nation’s superpower status: a role in the world

¹Collazo, Gilberto, “Romans 14:1-12 Pastoral Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A, Volume 4*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p62.

that often seems to consist of rushing across other countries' borders to assess and fix their problems; often to cast them in our own image, even as we, the model, are so sharply divided and troubled at home, and leaving more and more of our own people to fend for themselves.

Sometimes, these judgments are a little like playing God. And sometimes--especially if we were raised in a hypercritical family—the behavior is so engrained in us, we barely aware we're even doing it. Non-doctrinal, extravagantly welcoming denomination that the United Church of Christ prides itself in being, we may think that, by definition, we are immune to the types of disagreements and hierarchies described by the apostle Paul in today's reading. But we, too, are human. And sometimes it can be difficult to resist the urge to gauge where it is exactly that we fall in the pecking order. Today we may not be at all bothered by whether or not someone chooses to eat meat. And we don't even *think* about changing the Sabbath day. That's been fixed for a long time. But how about messing with Sunday worship *time*? How about assessing the merits of praise bands versus traditional organ and choral music, old hymns versus new hymns, hymnals versus overhead projectors, or even the color choices for the walls or a new carpet in the sanctuary? *These* issues may raise our hackles somewhat more. *These* are the debates that might cause us to dig in our heels and exert the benefits of seniority. *These* are the things that are not only familiar, but near and dear to our hearts. And *these*, as well as some far weightier social concerns, are issues that have, in fact, divided some Twenty-first Century churches.

As in Paul's day, as new people enter our doors, we have to anticipate that their presence will change the flavor of our congregation a little bit...and not always in ways we would have anticipated. At times this will feel absolutely refreshing and invigorating to us. It's wonderful to have others "get" and appreciate our church as much as we do. It's terrific to see the pews fill up

and to have not only more people, but *enthusiastic* people to serve God and the community side by side with us. Yet at other times we're bound to feel uncomfortable or even a little threatened by new faces, new voices, new *ideas* in our midst. And it is in these times that we may be tempted to hold onto the status quo a little more tightly, to resist even the smallest of changes... These would be absolutely natural reactions. And they would *feel* to us like self preservation.

Last week I read the remarkable new autobiography of Andre Dubus III, a writer who grew up not far from my own hometown in Massachusetts, yet a world away. Mine was a leafy suburb, his a gritty mill town. As a young boy Dubus was poor, scrawny, un-athletic, and often picked on by local bullies. This was, it seemed, his inescapable fate. That is, until he took up weight lifting and then boxing. As Andre's weight, muscles, and confidence grew, so too did his self righteousness and anger for all the pain and humiliation to which he had been subjected. And so he took up a crusade, first targeting with his fists those who had hurt him and his family over the years...and then striking out at strangers who appeared to be disrespecting women and people weaker than themselves. There was something of an adrenaline rush that came with this crusade, and what initially felt like a brand-new, positive self image. But then he tried to go to college, where he was surrounded by affluent coeds, labeled a "townie," and struggled to fit in. Dubus dropped out and continued along his destructive path, but later was able to complete his degree, do some graduate work, and discover his call and a new, constructive outlet--writing. And then he was *mostly* able to manage his temper and avoid the situations that triggered it...

Until one day Andre found himself on an overnight train with his wife. He had carefully chosen a car filled with elderly people, a school teacher, and her young students. Couldn't get much safer than that. That night the students—all girls--stretched out in the aisle to sleep, while the adults

drifted off in their seats. A serene scene if ever there was one...But then the door at the back of the car began to open, once, twice, three times; and menacing-looking young men entered and stomped back and forth through the car, apparently making drug deals in the one car ahead of them. Their heavy boots just barely missed the sleeping girls, but did cause them to wake and to whimper softly. After this had gone on for a little while and his wife had asked him to do *something*, Andre addressed one of the men and asked him to please leave *their* car. As you might expect, this gesture did not go over very well. The man did *not* leave and proceeded to verbally threaten Andre. Finally Dubus could resist no longer and used a line he had retired years before, "Do you want to take it outside?" Yes, of course the man did. Andre took his time carefully maneuvering around his seatmates and the girls at his feet. He met the man outside, in the space where the two cars came together. He saw that the young man was much bigger and stronger than he, and he saw his life flash before his eyes, saw his body under the train's wheels. But then Andre saw something else. Looking into the man's eyes, he saw his own young face and recalled his own youthful motivations. He saw fear and vulnerability in that boy's eyes and was sure some protective instincts lurked just beneath the surface as well. And instead of putting up his fists, Dubus opened his mouth and appealed to all that he was now seeing and sensing. "Hey, man, I was just trying to protect those little girls and help them get some sleep, you know? They were kind of afraid of you and your friends. I bet you have a little sister and know what it's like to want to keep her safe." Indeed, the man did. His whole demeanor changed, and the scene ended quietly, amicably even. In that moment the man was clearly changed, but so was Andre. Returning home, he saw his former foes and even his own neglectful father with new eyes of

compassion and understanding. He saw their common wounds, and he was able to meet them where they were.²

One of the tensions of this text from Romans, which is less clear in this Message paraphrase than it is in other translations, is the distinction Paul makes between the weak and the strong. It is, first of all, a little ironic that Paul is instructing the Romans not to judge their peers, to leave that to God, even as he *himself* is making a judgment about them. It is ironic that he is labeling groups of people with highly subjective, loaded terms. And, *of course*, we can assume it is Paul and the long-timers who are the strong ones, the wise, capable ones who know how to exercise their freedom in Christ. Then, of course, it must be the *others*, the *newer* folks, who are *weak* and require all kinds of *rules* and *structures* to know for sure they're on the right track.

Do you remember Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector from the Gospel of Luke, which we discussed last October? Do you remember how, as they were praying in the temple, the sinful tax collector pled to God for forgiveness, while the Pharisee thanked God that he was not like that sinful tax collector? How Jesus forced us, his listeners, to assume the Pharisee's role as we unwittingly judged the Pharisee far less holy than either ourselves *or* the earnest tax collector? There is certainly a bit of that parabolic mind bending going on here. But I would also invite you to consider something else, and that is this: That Paul never fully rid himself of his former identity as a Pharisee named Saul, tormentor of Christians and accessory to the stoning death of Stephen. And that he spoke from this place as much as from his newer identity as a time-tested, faithful apostle of Christ. He, too, had demons, wounds, and weaknesses; a shadow side, no matter how far along he was in his faith journey or how confidently--*or even arrogantly*--he conducted or expressed himself.

² Dubus, Andre III: *Townie: A Memoir*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011.

Truly, it is God alone who knows the precise nature of our hearts and measure of our capabilities. Is it possible that we can each be both weak and strong? Dark and light? And, knowing that, can we tend to our own knitting and allow others to tend to theirs? Can we continually expand our circle to embrace a greater and greater variety of crafts people? I happen to believe we can, and that we will be far richer and, yes, stronger for it.

Amen.