

My great-great-great-grandfather, Anders, in Värmland, Sweden was a sexton at Brunskog Lutheran Church, where a gravemarker thanks him for 72 years of work. Another, three-times-great-grandfather, Nils, was so devout a Christian that, no matter the season or weather, he walked to church so that his horses would not have to labor on the Sabbath. My great-great-grandfather, Johan, was a Sunday school teacher. He expected his children to know the answer to any Bible question that he might pose to the students in class.

My lineage has been dominated by Christian rectitude of a sort that leads me to remark that I come from a long line of judgemental people. My great-grandpa Fritz lived in the rural town of Elizabeth, Colorado and was so strenuously opposed to alcohol that when, after a long life, he passed away, at least one local businessman remarked, "Well, now I can get a liquor license." Judgements, of course, get passed down. When my Grandma Anderson came for visits, my parents moved their modest supply of liquor bottles from the kitchen cupboard to a dark nook beneath the basement stairs. My siblings and I lived in fear of Grandma's assessment of our scholastic vigor. She was ever armed with a Scrabble board and math flash cards, and if she felt that you were soft on spelling or on the sum of 9×7 , there was no knowing how long you would be expected to play.

"Judge not, lest ye be judged," Jesus said, and he might have been saying those words to the dutiful brother in his own parable, the one who resents his father for celebrating the return of a son who is—we are encouraged to imagine—a gambler, a drug addict, an exploiter of women. The prodigal son has taken his duty to himself and to others lightly. Why would anyone want him back?

It is, in the words of the song from *Hair*, easy to be hard, easy to pass judgement. It is so easy for me to cuss out the drivers of other cars; I don't even have to think about it. It is easy to rant about the perceived failings of others; it is what we do in comment sections all across the World Wide Web. It is what we do to our friends and our family members. Even if we are not hard to their faces, our hearts are hard; we judge the paths that our loved ones take. It is easy to cut down people who are making mistakes that we are not making—at the moment—because we judge them as belonging to a lesser order of human being. We consistently engage in the fallacious premise that we are good and others are bad. But in last week's

reading and today's, Jesus makes it clear that no one's sins are greater than anyone else's. God makes tigers, and God makes lambs. But as for our sins, we are entirely, profoundly the same.

Still, we are full of resentment over the behavior of others. The word "resentment" comes from the French verb *sentir*—to feel. To resent is to feel again. A well-known Zen lesson involves a junior and a senior monk who, in their travels, meet a woman attempting to cross a river. She asks for their assistance. The two monks glance at each other, after which the senior monk takes the woman on his back and wades across the river. The woman goes on her way, and the junior monk crosses the river, in shock, to catch up with his companion. After a long while, he upbraids the senior monk, reminding him that they have each taken a vow not to touch a woman. The older monk looks at the younger one calmly and says, "Brother, I set the woman down on the other side of the river. Why are you still carrying her?"

Epictetus, whom we read from as our call to worship, was a Stoic philosopher who studied and emulated the work of men with whom Saint Paul met in his lifetime. Christianity takes the central tenet of Stoicism—the idea that most of life, with the exception of our reactions to what happens, is out of our control—and deepens it. Jesus reminds us that, notwithstanding their total helplessness, God dresses the wildflowers. Jesus says, seek God first; everything else will fall into place. Epictetus writes that the chief thing is to have piety toward the gods and to believe that they administer the universe, the All, well. If one insists, instead, upon judging events as good or bad, says Epictetus, one inevitably falls into blame, hatred, and resentment.

It is this idea that Christianity takes further. Jesus doesn't tell us merely to suffer people whom we dislike or to tolerate them. Jesus says, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you." In Christianity, there can be no resentment. The only response that we can have to being hated or to feeling hatred is to love.

And yet, our resentment is not trivial. Long after he died, I learned that my beloved Grandpa Sam and his brothers once assaulted a couple of hippies by holding them down and shaving their heads. One of my aunts warned me not to mention to my Grandma Anderson that I had friends who were gay. Judgements such as these about the value of other people

are the dirty underside of rectitude. They fundamentally alter the lives of human beings and affect whether people can live and work and love and worship in peace.

Human beings, though, are complicated. Grandpa Sam died when I was four. I remember him chiefly for getting down on one knee on the kitchen floor in his farm house and telling me with tears in his eyes that he was sorry, because he had accidentally run over with a tractor a kitten, named Cutie, whom he had given to my siblings and me. I was struck, as a little girl, by the notion that no one had ever treated my feelings with so much respect. And Grandma Anderson was content to lose friends for trying to hire a black man to teach in the town's one-room schoolhouse. She taught prisoners how to read, and at the age of ninety, she was tutoring at-risk youth. Jesus tells us to stop wagging our fingers about the blind spots—the flecks of dust—in the eyes of other people. To practice religion is to remove the branches from our own eyes.

As with resentment, we have adopted the French expression for experiences that we seem to be having, in exactly the same way, for a second time: *déja vu*—meaning “already seen.” When we meet the world in this way, with calcified impressions of who other people are, and whether they are good or bad, we are choosing to live outside the kingdom of God.

A month ago, I was walking my dog, Santiago. He was tugging his leash toward a row of hedges where he knows that rabbits are likely to shelter. At the same time, a man stepped off a bus, and while we were not particularly near him, the man backed away. Then he shouted at me.

“Those dogs kill 300 people a year!” he said.

Santiago is a pit bull mix, which is to say that he is an object of both fascination and loathing. I am aware that there are no reliable statistics linking dog bites to breeds, nor is there evidence that pit bulls are congenitally more aggressive than other dogs. And I was aware that day of how Santiago would have wagged his tail and trotted forward to nuzzle the man on the sidewalk had he but smiled. I knew that there are reasons for a dog's behavior, even when it is destructive, just as there are reasons for a man's behavior, even when it is destructive. I could see that the man was frightened. He resented me and my dog, and his resentment had reason to him. It was not trivial. Santiago and I walked on.

The next morning, as I was scrolling through news on my phone, I came across a headline about a pit bull that had mauled a child in Brooklyn. I stared at it for several long moments, and then I tapped it and read the article. As the day wore on, I began to look at Santiago with a wary eye. We sat on the couch together as we often do, and I scratched his chest. He growled low in his throat, making a noise that I call a “dog purr,” and I shuddered, suddenly unsure as to whether he was expressing contentment or warning. When I got into bed that night and Santiago jumped on the mattress and stretched his back alongside mine, I turned out the light and was chilled by the thought that an unpredictable animal was breathing beside me. In the morning, I awoke to Santi’s face on the pillow next to mine. He blinked his brown eyes half-open, smacked his lips as if his mouth were dry, offered me his tongue for a kiss and wagged his tail. I was reassured, and alarmed at the size of his jaw.

It was that easy to infect me with prejudice against my own dog: one fearful comment from a stranger.

Our resentment of others, our prejudice, arises out of fear—the fear that there is not enough: not enough money or power or land or happiness or safety. We imagine that we are competing, that we have to be better than others in order to get what we want. We think that if we give women more authority, we must strip an equal amount from men. We think that one immigrant with a job means one native-born citizen without one. We think that we must choose between being brutalized by police officers or by criminals. This is our sin: we are desperate and anxious because we do not believe that God is good.

John the Evangelist writes that “there is no fear in love...perfect love drives out fear.” Through the parable of the prodigal one, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is not limited. The child who has stayed at home and done the right things, though he has not been given a fatted calf to feast on, is reminded that everything the parent has is and always has been his. The kingdom, Jesus says in Luke 17:21, is in our midst, it is in the crowd of us, now.

The question that we should ask ourselves as Christians is never a resentful, What is wrong with our leaders in Washington? It is, How long has it been since I invited my neighbor into my home? The question is, When did I last plant a tree? Have I ever written a letter to a

prisoner? The question is, When I am in the busy-ness of my life and I see someone who is grimy or fragile or confused, do I stop and ask if I can help?

To live in the kingdom, we must stop seeing things as we have already seen them, and see them anew. We must stop seeing enemies where there are only children of God. We must stop seeing God as a tallier of scores and see instead, to paraphrase the poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, love like a coat when winter comes to cover us. And we must stop seeing ourselves as undeserving of that coat of love. We must see in ourselves the beauty of wildflowers. When we can do that, there is no longer anything to resent.