

**Sermon for the Pretty Decent**  
**February 16, 2020**  
**The Rev. Scott Walters**

Being a child of the age, my morning newspaper ritual involves a cup of coffee and opening the Daily Memphian app on my phone. Which is where, on Wednesday, I saw that the final lineup for the Beale Street Music Festival had been announced. I'm sure all of you were thrilled to hear Weezer and Smashing Pumpkins are coming. I feel like those bands should mean more to me than they do, having graduated college in 1990, but they're not the ones that excite me.

I want to hear the retro soul singer Leon Bridges, and folk rockers The Lumineers and the Avett Brothers, and plain old folkster Patty Griffin. I'm dying to see Brittany Howard of the Alabama Shakes. And Bobby Rush will be in the Blues Tent, as will Keb Mo, and Taj Mahal, both of whom I saw in Eureka Springs, Arkansas a long, long time ago.

But guess who else is coming to Memphis this May? Mavis is. Mavis Staples.

I do hate it when preachers name drop in their sermons. So I'm glad I don't have to listen to what I'm about to say. But I kind of think Mavis Staples got me this job.

I didn't list her as a reference per se. But Hall Gardner was chair of the search committee, and I know his interest in the guy from Little Rock perked up considerably when he heard we'd brought Mavis to Christ Church for a concert. And, friends, October 11, 2011, truly was a glorious night to be in church.

Mavis turned 80 this past year. And when she arrived to warm up for the show eight years ago, she was recovering from knee surgery. In quintessential rector fashion, I had very little to do with getting Mavis to Little Rock. But I got to be the guy who introduced her to the sold out crowd and watched the show from the second pew.

Which meant I got to see what almost no one else could see that night. I saw the sharp wince of pain on Mavis's face as she mounted each of the three steps into the chancel. And then I watched her take a breath, gather herself, lay her cane on a nearby stool, and then bring the house of God completely down for the next 90 minutes.

She sang a bunch of the old Staples Singers songs that night, most of which had been recorded by Al Bell for Stax Records here in Memphis. She sang "Respect Yourself" and "I'll Take You There," anthems of the Civil Rights era, and beloved by Pops Staples's friend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She also sang "Why (Am I Treated So Bad?)." A song her father was inspired to write after watching nine unimaginably brave black students walk through a gauntlet of shouts and hatred and into Little Rock's Central High in 1957. Our son Alden and his friend Walt, both Central High sophomores at the time, were sitting in front of us. And as the last encore closed, Walt turned around and said, "Mr. Walters, I think I've been to church."

I tell you of this now only to say that there are people in this world who have experienced great loss, injustice, and pain, and who carry these experiences with them into the making of their art. But of these, there are a few who do so in a way that transcends their suffering without denying it, and transforms it into something new. To watch Mavis Staples set aside the pain in her body that night, and sing exultant songs that arose from the wrongs people of color have endured in this country was more than a lesson on what it takes to be a great artist. I think it was a lesson on another way to live.

Jesus's great lesson on another way to live is what we call the Sermon on the Mount. He walks up the mountain and sits down at the beginning of Matthew chapter five. And he finishes at the end of chapter seven. He tells us that people whose lives seem less than lucky are actually blessed and beloved. He teaches about prayer and fasting and where our true treasure should lie. He shows us the way of nonviolent resistance, turning the other cheek, and of giving with no expectation of a return. He says we simply cannot

serve God and wealth and that it does no good whatsoever to worry about tomorrow. He packs a lot into one sermon. Probably because he doesn't waste a chapter talking about the music he likes.

But in today's portion of the sermon, he seems to come down hard on the pretty good people of the world. People who haven't killed anyone. People who aren't cheating on their spouses. Men who aren't sending wives away into a culture in which they had almost no power or status and little means of support. He seems to be taking the pretty good people down a notch or two or maybe ten. Because by the time he's finished this little section and told us to let our yeses be yes and our noes be no, we find the pretty good people in the same camp as murderers and adulterers and probably, by extension, with the committers of whatever sins you happen to find hardest to forgive. He seems to be putting the pretty good in league with those beyond whatever pale we've erected to define what's moral, respectable, and decent.

How in the world is this helpful to someone, not trying to be perfect, but to someone just trying to lead a pretty good life. A person who maybe even wants to follow Jesus, and to find the abundant life he said he would show us? Does Jesus want to make us better people by making us feel worse about ourselves?

Well, maybe. But it also may be that we simply can't live the way of Jesus if we think we can leave our own pain and brokenness behind.

Put another way, as the humorist Robert Benchley said, there are just two kinds of people in this world: those who believe there are just two kinds of people in the world and those who don't. Jesus seemed to be one of those who don't. He thought there was only one kind: sinners.

What terrible news, right? I mean, maybe it's good news on a really bad day. When we're feeling worthless, full of shame and guilt and certain that if anyone really knew what the darker corners of our hearts were capable of imagining they'd cast us into the outer darkness straight away. At least we may have some company.

But maybe the rest of the time we manage to pull off a believably decent life among the pretty good. So why lump us in with the...you know...with the deplorables and all, Jesus?

Well, there's a lie we begin to believe from the time we have a sense of what fairness is. The lie is that hypocrites lose the right to comment on the way things are. A hypocrite, after all, is someone who says he believes one thing but does another. I think Jesus may be saying that's the only kind of person there is. But that it's also just the kind of person he's come to redeem.

And the redeeming wisdom of his teaching is that when we deny our own pain and brokenness and failure, and point to someone else or some other category of people, we add alienation to the damage our sins have already done.

If I justify my rage and indignation by saying, "Well, at least I'm not a murderer," that justification is what allows the rage to keep simmering. And it does so by placing other human beings in a category I don't think I belong to. Judgment is not just one more sin Jesus warns us against. Judgment is how I add distance to the made up moral space I think separates my sins from the sins of someone else. Sin is a separation already. Jesus won't have us adding the distance of judgment to that.

Because the truth really is that we will never help heal a world we refuse to include ourselves within. America's original sin of racism will never be healed as long as we believe racists are only people who use the "n-word" or vote for certain candidates or attend certain kinds of rallies. A concept like "implicit bias" may seem like just a newfangled form of political correctness, but I'm coming to believe it is deeply consistent with the way Jesus taught us to understand sin.

He said that the stuff of murder swirls around in all of us in ordinary anger. The stuff of adultery swirls around in all of us when another human being is reduced to an object of my desire. And the stuff of racism and bigotry live in the same parts of my heart, where my implicit responses to the world are formed, long before my conscious mind assures me I'm better than that. After all, the first priority of my rational mind will always be to justify myself to myself.

We hear every day that we live in a deeply divided time. I've said it plenty of times from this pulpit. What we hear less often is that division is a symptom, not the disease. The disease is the same old sin that's infected the world since long before Jesus's time. It's a wound that goes all the way back to that garden when one human looked at another one and said, "I think we all know that the problem here is her."

Jesus wants to show us another way. He wants to teach us the art of living in a broken world. And he insists that we cannot live well if we deny a brokenness that we all share. Because if we let our sins and pains separate us from one another, and then add the separation of judgment to that, well, where it leaves us in the end is alone. Which may be the actual hell Jesus wants us to avoid.

Mavis didn't only sing the old Staples Singers songs in Little Rock. She'd just recorded an album with a youngster named Jeff Tweedy. He's a white guy, almost exactly my age, actually. Youngster is a matter of perspective, I guess. And the song he wrote for Mavis was, "You Are Not Alone." She sang, "I'm with you/ I'm lonely too... A broken home/ A broken heart/ Isolated and afraid/ Open up this is a raid/ I wanna get it through to you/ You are not alone."

She got through alright. I'll never know what it's like to have spent eight decades in this world as an African-American woman. But when this woman, who I know carried pain in her body that night and surely carried wounds in her heart as well, when Mavis sang, "I'm with you, I'm lonely too," we believed her. And a distance, that seemed much older than any of us, may have closed at least a little right then.