

Lest I be judged

By [John P. Leggett](#)

May 15, 2016

In my first year of seminary, one of my professors suggested an exercise to our class that sounded fairly simple. He encouraged us to go to a public place, such as a shopping mall, and to watch people.

“Note your reactions to those you see,” he told us. “You will be drawn to some. But others, just by their appearance, will create the opposite reaction within you. And you will have these responses before you know anything about them, other than how they look to you.”

And he reminded us that we should pay attention to the people who repel us. “People like them will be in every congregation you serve,” he told us.

So a few days later I drove to the mall and spent an afternoon watching people and marking my reaction to them. And I learned my professor was right. I was shocked to discover how often I had a negative reaction to certain types of people who were doing nothing more than walking the aisles of a mall.

Before that day, had you asked me whether I viewed or treated everyone equally, I would have immediately responded yes. I might have even taken offense, because I was convinced that I was the kind of person who judged others based on “the content of their character” and not by their appearance. And yet, as I sat on my judgment bench that afternoon, I felt myself recoiling from certain people because they fit into some category that I apparently despised, or feared.

Those walking past me that day had no idea that the young man sitting on the bench was being anything but kind. My bench became a judgment seat from which I pronounced a verdict on those appearing before me. And my verdicts came quick and without mercy:

Wrong age. Wrong hairstyle. Wrong body type. Wrong complexion. Wrong friends. Wrong band name on a T-shirt. Wrong skin color. Wrong party. Wrong religion.

For a while, I forgot why I was at the mall in the first place. It wasn't to judge others by casting them into categories of people I could dismiss. No, I was there to discover the biases within me, biases that were not only denying the humanity of others, but which were also corrupting my own.

And that's when I pronounced the one judgment that mattered that day, the only one I knew to be true. My heart, which I had always thought to be open wide, was closed in ways I had failed to see.

I wish I could say that I have rid myself of the biases revealed in me that afternoon at the mall. But even as I type these words in the middle of a crowded coffee shop, I find myself looking at some of those sitting around me. And no matter how much I wish it weren't true, I hear my pronouncements naming the varied ways they embody "wrongness" rising unbidden within me.

And yet, I take heart, because at least I am remembering what I learned almost 30 years ago at the mall: that the judgments I think I am making about others have nothing to do with them at all.

*Originally posted at [Kairos Corner](#)*