RECOGNIZING JESUS IN OTHER PEOPLE

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 25:31-46

“As you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me.” (Matthew 25:40)

If Jesus came again, do you think you would recognize him? If he showed up here in this church, do you think we would recognize him? It would really be a shame if he showed up and we missed him because we were looking for someone or something else. If he came to this church I hope we would welcome him.

Several years ago at one of our First Friday get-togethers to discuss a movie of religious significance, we watched the movie “O God!” In this movie, God appears in the form of George Burns. Most of us thought that this was an unlikely reincarnation of God, but then again, why not? Remember, God’s incarnation as a baby in a stable in a crummy little town in the middle of nowhere defied logic or even common sense.

In the movie God tells John Denver, who alone can see and hear God, that he has been selected to spread the word. We thought that John Denver was an unlikely apostle, but then again, why not? Remember, the first apostles were nothing to write home about.

In our reflections this Easter season, we have been focusing on the theme of recognizing Jesus. This was apparently a problem for the eleven disciples, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus’ two followers on the road to Emmaus.

This morning I would like us to consider another passage of scripture. This passage of scripture does not relate a post-resurrection encounter. It does, however, continue the theme of this Easter season. It speaks to the matter of recognizing Jesus. It might actually help us to recognize Jesus if he were to come again, especially if he were to come to Southborough or even to come to this church.

The scripture lesson we heard this morning appears as a part of a selection of readings on the Second Coming. These passages are commonly regarded as heralding a future historical or cosmological event. At the Second Coming, Christ, who first appeared in the human form of Jesus of Nazareth, will come to us in glory.

The Second Coming is described as a time of judgment, a time when Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep will go to the right, which means they are
favored, and the goats will go to the left. The sheep will enter into eternal life. The goats will go to hell.

On what basis are the sheep differentiated from the goats? It is interesting that these two groups, the saved and the damned, those who inherit the kingdom and those who do not, are not differentiated on the basis of their religious beliefs. Jesus does not say that those who believe in him, those who believe that he is the Son of God, go to the right and everyone else goes to the left.

This implies that Jesus does not judge us on the basis of our beliefs. We are judged on the basis of our faith, the quality of our relationship with him. We are judged by how we respond to him. And an important factor in how we respond to Jesus is our ability or inability to recognize him.

In this predicted Second Coming, Jesus first speaks to the righteous. He tells them that they are to inherit the kingdom. What have they done to deserve such an honor? Very simply, they ministered to him. Jesus tells them,

\[ I \text{ was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, } \]
\[ \text{I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. } \]

The righteous are confused. They do not remember seeing Jesus hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison. In response to their questioning Jesus tells them,

\[ \text{Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me. } \]

Then Jesus turns to those who will not experience the kingdom of God. He upbraids them not only their lack of charity toward their brothers and sisters, but also their lack of charity toward him. He says,

\[ \text{Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. } \]

The unrighteous, not quite sure what Jesus is talking about, ask him when they encountered him in such desperate need. To be sure, they encountered many of their brothers and sisters in need. They are willing to admit that they turned their backs on
their brothers and sisters; they passed by on the other side. But they never saw Jesus. If they had seen Jesus in need, they surely would have responded.

Jesus tells them that there are not two categories of people: people within whom Jesus dwells and people within whom Jesus does not dwell. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit which Jesus promised would come following the death of his human incarnation, is present in everyone. There is only one category. Jesus tells those who did not reach out to those in need that they, consequently, did not reach out to him. He says,

*Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.*

Like the disciples following the resurrection, we are confronted with a problem. We do not have access to Jesus of Nazareth in human form. We are not even afforded the kind of post-resurrection encounters that Mary and the other disciples experienced. Like the disciples, we need to find or discover Jesus. But where should we look?

The disciples knew Jesus in human form, but this human form died. They rediscovered him on several occasions following his resurrection. In these encounters he appears to them “in a different form,” so different that they at first fail to recognize him. Following his ascension, they no longer experience him in even this post-resurrection human form. If they fail to discover him as the Holy Spirit, they will live their lives under the mistaken belief that he is no longer with them.

As we know, Jesus is always with us. We cannot be separated from Jesus any more than the disciples could. However, just like the disciples, if we are not conscious of his presence, we will live our lives as if we were separated from him. If we live our lives this way, we will not experience the kingdom of heaven that is both within and among us.

Where is Jesus now? Some people believe he is in a place called heaven. They believe heaven is different from earth, that it is separate from earth. They believe that at the time of the Second Coming, Jesus will reappear on earth, will come in all his glory to judge the quick and the dead.

This may very well be the case. There is another option, however. Perhaps Jesus is already here on earth. Perhaps Jesus is not separate from us. In fact, he may be nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Jesus, as the Holy Spirit, dwells within each and every
one of us. He dwells or is incarnate not only in those who look like us, act like us, and believe what we believe. He is incarnate in what he calls “the least of these.”

I think it is sad when people say that they can’t wait until they die and get to heaven so they can see God. They can’t wait until they die and get to heaven so they can be with God. They can’t wait until they die so they can be reunited with their Lord and with loved ones who have already passed on to the other side.

What if heaven is right here and now? What if God is right here and now, not separated from the earth or from us? Perhaps heaven is not one place and earth another. Perhaps heaven and earth are one, and both heaven and earth are full of the glory of God. Sometimes I suspect that by dichotomizing heaven and earth, we have desacralized life. We have divided the world into two realms: the sacred and the secular. In the process of doing this, we have impoverished both the world and ourselves.

Like the disciples following the resurrection, we need to rediscover Jesus. Jesus tells us how we can do this. We can see Jesus in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

It is relatively easy to see Jesus in the face of a little child. Not everyone can do this, however; I feel sad for those who cannot. It is relatively easy to see Jesus in a loved one. Not everyone can do this, however; I feel sad for those who cannot. It is relatively easy to see Jesus in some of the great people of history: Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, the Dalai Lama, and Mother Theresa of Calcutta. It is true that not everyone can do this, however; I feel sad for those who cannot.

It is a little more challenging for us to see Jesus, to experience the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit in the stranger. It is even a little more challenging to see him in the homeless, in refugee families, in those who are hungry and thirsty, those who are dying of disease. It is even more difficult to see him in the face of people in prison, in the face of hardened criminals. Yet he is there, also. It is extremely difficult to see Jesus in the face of those who declare themselves to be our enemies. Yet Jesus does not draw fine lines, at least in this passage of scripture. The Muslim terrorist is also our brother and sister.

Huston Smith, the historian of religion, has suggested the following categorization of different forms of belief:

_To the atheist there is no God._
_To the monotheist there is one God._
_To the polytheist, there are many gods._
To the mystic, there is only God.

What if the mystic is right? What if there is only God? What if we are all incarnations of God’s great creative spirit? Then we can truly discover Jesus in our brothers and sisters, not only in those whom we love or venerate, but also in “the least of these.”

Mother Theresa of Calcutta said it best. She said that she, her nuns, and the volunteers who minister to the poor, homeless, sick, and dying of Calcutta do not minister in the name of Jesus. In their acts of ministry they are not ministering on behalf of Jesus. They believe they are actually ministering to Jesus.

If we could see Jesus in the face of our brothers and sisters, in those who are dying from starvation or lack of clean water, in those who are homeless in our country or refugees from war-torn countries, in those who suffer from AIDS or the other diseases that ravage humanity, in those who are addicted to alcohol or drugs, in those who have committed crimes against humanity, and even in those who, out of their fanatically dichotomized religious beliefs seek to destroy us, then we could never be separated from Jesus. This would also change the way we as Christians respond to other people, to our brothers and sisters, and especially to those in great need throughout the world.

How can we discover or rediscover Jesus? How can we recognize Jesus now that he is in a “different form?” Jesus gives us a hint when he says,

“As you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me.”

If he does come again, and he may already be here, I certainly hope we will recognize him.

A communion reflection shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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