

RECOGNIZING JESUS IN OTHER PEOPLE

(04/22/18)

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 recognize him and welcome him!

A couple of years ago, a young man with long hair, someone none of us had ever seen before, came in shortly after the worship service started and sat about half way down on the right. He left immediately after the conclusion of the service and we never saw him again. Several members of the choir, who have a great vantage point for seeing who is here and who is not here, were convinced he was Jesus. I wasn't so sure. He didn't look like he spoke Aramaic. I also hoped that his walking away and never returning was not a judgment on my preaching. But every Sunday these same choir-members look for him. At least we know there will be a couple of people here at worship every week!

Around that time, at one of our Friday evening 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. Even though we liked some of his songs, like “Rocky Mountain High,” we thought that John Denver was an unlikely apostle. Then again, why not? Remember, the first apostles were nothing to write home about!

This Easter season we have been focusing on relationship of believing and seeing. Today I would like us to think about how our belief can help us see deeper into Jesus. As we know, the matter of even recognizing Jesus was apparently a problem for the eleven disciples, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus' two followers on the road to Emmaus.

The scripture lesson this morning is from 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, according to church doctrine, 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. (Note the prejudice against both goats and “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 the two groups, 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 that he is the Son of God go to the right and everyone else goes to the left. Jesus does not say that only those who are Christian go to the right and everyone else goes to the left. He does not say that only liberal Taoist-Buddhist-Christians who are interested in the relationship of faith and spirituality to quantum physics, evolutionary biology, and C. G. Jung’s understanding of the archetype of the Self go to the right and everyone else goes to the left. Though I have to admit that this would be very comforting—at least to me!

Jesus makes it clear that in his Second Coming he will not judge us on the basis of our beliefs, whether they are orthodox or not. We are judged by how we respond to him. An important factor in how we respond to him is our ability or inability to recognize him.

In his vignette, which is presented as either a teaching or a warning, Jesus first speaks to the righteous, those that are to inherit the kingdom. What have they done to deserve such an honor? Very simply, they ministered to him. Jesus tells them,

I 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, 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,

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 did not dwell in the kingdom of God on earth and may not after they die. He upbraids them not only for their lack of charity toward their brothers and sisters, but also for their lack of charity toward him. He says,

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 he dwells and people within whom he does not dwell. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit that Jesus promised would come following the death of his human incarnation, is present in everyone. There is only one category. Consequently, if we did not reach out to those in need, we 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 rediscover him on several occasions following his resurrection. In these encounters he appears to them “in a different form,” in a 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.

Jesus assures his disciples that he will be with them always, even to the end of the age. We cannot be separated from Jesus any more than the disciples could. However,

like the disciples, if we are not conscious of his presence, if live our lives as if we were separated from him, we will not experience the kingdom of heaven that is within 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. In the Second Coming, Jesus will reappear on earth, will come in glory to judge the quick and the dead.

This may very well happen. There is another option, however. Perhaps Jesus is already here on earth. Perhaps he 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 is incarnate not only in those who look like us, act like us, and believe what we believe. He is incarnate in what we commonly regard as the pariah, the social outcast.

I think it is sad when people say that 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.

But 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, in the adorable little girl we baptized here last month. 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 Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, the Dalai Lama, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. 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 more challenging to see him in the homeless, in refugee families, in people of a different race or sexual orientation, in those who are dying of heroin addiction. It is even more difficult to see him in the face of hardened

criminals. Yet he is there. 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 and her nuns do not minister to the poor, homeless, sick, and dying of Calcutta *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. Wow! This humble woman really gets it!

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 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 him. This would change the way we as Christians respond to other people, to our brothers and sisters, 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 Jesus does come again, *and he may already be here*, I certainly hope we will recognize and reach out to him!

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