



Christ the King Sunday, November 22, 2020

When Did We See You?

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles

Psalm 95:1-7a; Matthew 25:31-46

The Fine Art of Noticing

There is so much to see, it would be a pity if we missed it. If you go to a party, do you look for the person who is off by themselves, who has not yet had someone to engage in conversation? If you do that, you know that, out of such a small but important extra effort, great friendships are born. That person may change your life for the better, even as you might change theirs for the better. And even if that does not happen, certainly what will happen is that they will go home from that event thinking, "It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, because somebody noticed me."

Multiply that by the people who have come to the party of life, and who are spending their days off somewhere all alone, and you begin to draw closer to what Jesus is telling us in our Scripture message. Notice, friend.

Notice the people who are right there under your nose.

And the people who are just down the block. And the people who are beside you in line — well, hopefully socially distanced, but in line nonetheless. Notice the people who are crying out, "Have mercy on me." Notice the people who are so ill they cannot get to where they will find healing. Notice the people who have lost their way. Notice the people who have daily struggles none of us would exchange for our own.

Notice, friend. That is what Jesus did and what Jesus does. Our Lord turns aside. Christ draws near. Jesus looks us in the eyes. He calls us by name. Jesus finds those things that bother us most, and finds a way to alleviate those very things.

I had a wonderful friend I used to have lunch with from time to time at his favorite restaurant here in Oakland. What I discovered, the first time that we had lunch together, is that small talk soon moved to large talk, with this friend. He would say, "How are you?" and then ask one or two more questions. And before I knew it, I would find myself sharing what was troubling me most at that very point in my life. He had a gift for the fine art of noticing. I wish I could have lunch with him one more time. But I cannot. He has entered the Church Triumphant. So, the next best thing for me to do would be to pass along what I experienced in his presence — to practice the fine art of noticing.

It hurts not to be seen. You have had this happen, and so have I. You are somewhere a bit out of your ordinary bailiwick. You see, there, someone you know, either slightly or a bit more — an acquaintance. You say hello. That person more or less ignores you. They don't really see you. They glaze over like a box of Krispy Kreme doughnuts. Then, they move on as quickly as they can. They leave you feeling unnoticed, and, therefore, unvalued. So it would be fair to ask: Who goes unnoticed in your world?

If you have ever lived in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a beautiful part of our state, where I spent my high school years, you will resonate to this. Just like here in Western Pennsylvania we have our "Pittsburghese," in Lancaster, there are some phrases that pop up fairly regularly: Outen the light. Don't eat yourself full. There's cake back yet. Stop your grexing. It's spritzing out. It wonders me.

Another one is this: It is said by someone you know, but have not seen for some time. They say: "I didn't *recognize* you!" Do you hear what that really means? If you think it means that you have changed, but not for the better, that you have grown older, or balder, or more frail, or whatever else, that is their way of saying, "Gosh, you look like the wreck of the Hesperus," without saying it directly. (In the South, they would quickly follow it up with "Bless your heart.") It is a kind of "oblique critique." I fear that, all too often, we end up saying something like that, or giving that impression, when we are with one or another of God's children who are simply longing for us to see them, to recognize them, to let them know that they matter.

Charles Dickens, who understood the human condition just about as well as anyone anywhere, valued the times when people “open their shut-up hearts freely, to think of people as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.” We are all on the same journey.

Teri Gerdes tells this story (on her blog in 2012):

It's a simple act. A simple gesture. But it makes a huge difference. There is a sweet, elderly man who attends my church. Though he is getting on in years, he has a handshake and grip that puts many young men to shame. He reminds me so much of my late father-in-law, a man who also grew up in the era where a handshake meant something.

I can't help but find this man at church during the greeting time, just to say "hello," shake his hand, and chat with him a little bit. I have shared with him and his wife that he reminds me so much of my father-in-law, and being able to talk a little bit with him each Sunday blesses me because it makes me remember the kind, gentle man who accepted me as his daughter twenty-six years ago.

So I was taken aback a little bit this past Sunday when I shook his hand. And he wouldn't let go. He stood there holding my hand as we talked and then looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Thank you ... for noticing me."

Amen.