

Are You Recognizable?

Acts 4:5-12
John 10:11-18

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Grace Episcopal Church
The 4th Sunday of Easter
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If you were with us last Sunday, you heard Rev. Michele pose some pretty big questions in her sermon. Working with the story known as the Road to Emmaus, in which two of the disciples did not recognize the risen Jesus, Rev. Michele asked us: Would you know the face of the risen Lord if he drew alongside you? What if he came and sat next to you in your pew? What if he was sat in a doorway as you walked past? What if he knocked on your door one evening asking for some change for sandwich? Would you recognize him?

Those questions really struck a nerve for me because, as I thought about them, I felt my own answer would probably be: “No. No I wouldn’t recognize him.”

When someone comes to sit next to me in a pew, I always try to greet them, with a few words or a nod of the head. If it is someone I don’t know, I might even introduce myself. What I am really focused on, though, is how close they will sit to me. I am a good Episcopalian, and I don’t want them sitting to close. I don’t want them to invade my personal pew space.

When I am walking down the street, I would probably not notice someone sitting in a doorway, unless they were doing something kind of strange or out-of-the-ordinary, in which case, I would think: that’s kind of weird; but, otherwise, I would not pay them much attention. I certainly would not stop and engage with them.

And, if some random stranger knocked on our door one evening looking for change for a sandwich, I honestly don’t know how I would react. I would probably give them some money from the change dish which we keep by the door, but at the same time, I would be wondering: Who are you? What you doing here? And, the next day I would probably speak with our building manager about outsiders walking through our building.

But, in none of these instances, in none of these people, would I recognize the face of Jesus. And, that is a huge problem. Every human being is made in the image of God, and when we do not see that divine spark in other people, when we do not recognize the face of Jesus in each other, it leads to all kinds of social ills. It leads to prejudice and bigotry. It leads to misunderstanding and suspicion and fear. It leads to events like those we have seen unfolding in Baltimore, and we are all at fault. We are all to blame, when we do not respect the dignity of every human being, but instead, treat them as some thing, or something other.

With those thoughts and feelings running through my head all week, today, I want to ask you another pretty big question, one that is related to the questions Rev. Michele asked, but turns

them around a bit. And, that question is this: Would someone recognize you as a follower of Jesus? If someone sat down next to you in a pew, or if someone encountered you on the street, or if someone knocked on your door, would they know you are a Christian?

In today's reading from the Book of Acts, it is not hard to recognize Peter as a follower of Jesus. Acts tells the story of the first believers in the weeks, months and years following the resurrection, and this morning's scene finds Peter on trial in front of the chief priest and the elders and the scribes. Given the circumstances, you might think Peter would show some signs of being nervous or afraid, but instead, he stands there, tall and upright, boldly proclaiming the Good News, telling everyone who was in the room about the power of Jesus. It was an incredibly courageous and faith-filled thing for him to do because these were the very people who conspired against Jesus. These were the ones who got Jesus crucified, and if they wanted to, they could have done the very same thing to Peter. Yet, there he was, like good old Baptist preacher, trumpeting salvation in the name of Jesus Christ right in front of their faces.

As impressive as Peter was, it was not his speaking that got Peter into trouble. Peter was already in pretty hot water with the authorities, and what got them so upset, the whole reason Peter was standing there in front of them, is he had been going good works. Peter was caring for the sick, and he was healing those who were ill. That's why the chief priest and the elders and the scribes had him arrested. That's why they were questioning him. That is how they knew Peter was a follower of Jesus – because he was helping those in need.

Peter and all of the other early believers were living in a way that was different from everyone else. They were patterning their lives on the way of Jesus. They were all of one heart and one soul. They loved their neighbors as themselves. They shared what they had, and there was not a needy person among them. They respected women. They cared for little children. They loved the sick and the dying. It was whole different ethos, a whole different way to be, and that is how the early believers were known as followers of Jesus - by the way they related to other people, to friends and to strangers, and to the world around them.

When I think back to those early Christians, I think of something Walt Whitman wrote in the preface to his classic book, *Leaves of Grass*. He said:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals; despise riches; give alms to everyone that asks; stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others; hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people; take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men; go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families; read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life; re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and [then, then] your very flesh shall be a great poem...

Those early followers of Jesus wrote a great poem, with every act of compassion, every sign of mercy, adding another line, until verse after verse, their lives illustrated the power and goodness of God's presence in the world.

That poem is still being written today, and each of us has a verse to add. At some point, we may have to stand before others just as Peter did and say, “This is what I believe about Jesus,” but most of the time, our lines are written in the ordinary here and now, in the little moments, day by day. Imagine going through this week loving the earth and the sun and the animals. Imagine standing up for something stupid and crazy. Imagine having patience and indulgence toward other people.

We all carry the light of Christ inside ourselves, and we have the power to let it shine, at home, at work, at church, out on the street. All we have to do is live a little differently from everyone else and bring a little gratitude or kindness or forgiveness or love into the world each day. If we can do that, if we can recognize Jesus in other people, people will recognize us as followers of Jesus.

Amen.