

St Mark Sermon:
Jan. 16-17, 2020
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
“Fully Seen and Lovingly Known”
Rev. Stephen P. Greggo, PsyD

Lectionary Readings

First Reading I Samuel 3:1-10

“Then Samuel said: Speak Lord for your servant is listening.” (I Samuel 3:10b)

Psalm Psalm 139:1-6; 13-18

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” (Ps. 139:13)

New Testament I Corinthians 6: 12-20

“You are not your own; you were brought at a price. Therefore honor God with you bodies.” (I Corinthians 6: 19b-20).

Gospel John 1: 43-51

“Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”
(John 1:48b)

Grace to you, and peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon in a Soundbite

The Lord sees you. The Lord sees you as infant, child and adult. The Lord sees you inside and out. The Lord sees you in private and public. The Lord sees you yesterday, today, and every day on your journey towards your heavenly home. If you hear the Lord Jesus speaking to you during this service, he might just say: “I saw you while you were speaking to my Father this morning at your kitchen table and as you were preparing your heart to enter worship.”

When you respond to the realization that in Jesus Christ, you are ‘fully seen and lovingly known’, “you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (Jn 1:51b)

Pray

I. Introduction: The Marvelous Comfort of Being Seen

In December 2019, Zoom had under 10 million daily participants. By March, 2020, the number jumped to 200 million and to 300 million by April. Today 300 million participants show their

faces in a Zoom session. Cisco WebEx also has 300 million. Google Meet has 100 million daily users and, though late to the online party, Microsoft Team now boasts a healthy 115 million participants daily. Not counting the numerous other players and sub-platforms, at least 850 million participants per day see one another in virtual meetings. The age of “being seen” digitally has only just begun.

Despite the wonder of this massive technological breakthrough, there is much angst in our culture over what virtual meetings gain and lose. Will digital portability give us new freedom to work and connect without physically moving off the couch? Will it mean the end of commercial workspaces or classrooms as we know these places? Will we attend more parties in 2021 virtually or in person? Your prediction may be as good as mine.

There is an advantage to being “seen” in a real-time, virtual connection over merely being heard via the soon to be obsolete telephone. ‘Hearing only’ falls well short of “hearing and seeing.” Nevertheless, are other senses or factors being left out? What does it take to be completely seen, understood, and recognized for who we are and what we bring to the conversation?

The crux of the Gospel reading is this. Without technology but through divine transcendence, Jesus sees us, knows us, and invites us to bask in the comfort of this truth: *God’s children are fully seen and lovingly known.* Our God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is ‘omniscient.’ This is the theological term to describe the reality that the Triune God is all knowing and all seeing. The objects that catch his attention are his beloved children. He sees us, knows us and adores us. This is a beautiful message.

Over the holiday, we spent hours with our grandchildren. Three-year old Selene Grace would constantly call out to “watch me;” “come with me,” “play with me.” It was a joy to be present and say, “good job,” “that’s so special” and “you are getting so big.” The same enthusiasm for his children brings the Lord to say to us: “I see you; totally see you.”

Think back over the past week. Do you recall a moment when you felt overwhelmed, alone, isolated, distant? Go back and picture where you were sitting or standing? What room? How intense was your mood? What were your thoughts? Stay there for a moment but add this to your imagination. The Lord appreciates you in those very moments. Let’s look at the Scriptures that describe this mysterious blessing.

II. Fresh Disciples: Seeing and Being Seen

The Gospel of John begins with a description of the Divine Logos (Word) first outside of time, then entering time. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God.” The one who was in the beginning enters reality and joins humanity “full of grace and truth.” Last Sunday we were reminded of his baptism and how God approved the launch of his unveiling. In our readings today, Jesus opens his human ministry by revealing his divinity to freshly appointed disciples. Jesus brings them onto his discipleship team one by one. Andrew hears, follows and is convicted enough to invite his brother Simon Peter.

Our Gospel reading for today picks up with Philip, who is called to follow and immediately goes to tag his brother Nathaniel. “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” At this juncture, the new disciple uses human terms to describe this Rabbi whom he so admires. The common practice in that day was to portray a person by identification with their father and hometown. Nathanael hears these human descriptions and raises an eyebrow. Jesus’ pedigree does not come across as impressive. The interaction that follows is brief yet poignant. Nathanael accepts his brother’s challenge and goes to check out Jesus for himself.

Jesus ‘sees’ Nathanael coming and makes an extraordinary statement. “Here comes an Israelite who displays the absolute best of what it means to be an Israelite.” This is a remarkable statement. Nathanael is taken aback...how do you know me? Jesus explains to Nathanael that he was fully seen sitting under the fig tree. The language is descriptive in this exchange. When Jesus welcomes Nathanael, he speaks about his identity, character, and integrity. Jesus states that Nathanael displays the character qualities that God’s people ought to model. He does not draw attention to Nathan’s outward appearance. We do not hear Jesus say: “Here is Nathanael with the ruddy complexion or stylish sandals or hey, what about that tunic?” The insight Jesus speaks aloud depicts the heart. The way that Jesus sees Nathaniel is identical to the manner in which he views us. Jesus, like his heavenly Father, has the characteristic of knowing things in an unlimited, comprehensive, and perfect way. Seeing all and having all knowledge does not blind God to what is essential or noteworthy. Hear this: when Jesus communicates what is important, he describes the condition of our heart: the hub of our relational being.

Why does Jesus zero in on Nathaniel sitting under that fig tree? Why not tell him what he ate for breakfast, mention who he chatted up at the local fish market, or who sat at his dinner table last evening? The fig tree scene is undoubtedly a reference to Nathaniel resting, praying, contemplating, and essentially grabbing quiet time. Jesus captures a moment that catches Nathaniel in an intimate private pause. Selecting this scene to illustrate his omniscience, Jesus makes it evident to Nathaniel that he is fully seen. Skeptical Nathaniel is instantly converted. From that point forward Nathan becomes a follower of Jesus. This conversion flows from his experience of what it is like to be fully seen and lovingly known.

Let’s take this summary from our Gospel reading.

- 1) Jesus Christ is omniscient and knows Nathaniel before Nathaniel even knows who Jesus even is.
- 2) Jesus captures Nathaniel’s heart by seeing into his individuality, his deepest longings and by recognizing who he really is.
- 3) Jesus see beyond the present as he looks ahead at what is to come. One day, as a follower of Jesus Christ, Nathaniel will see the unification of heaven and earth. He will experience the entry of the kingdom of God as it fills the geography of the entire planet. Hear this bold promise: follow the one who sees you and you will see His kingdom.

III. Being Seen and Becoming a Listening Servant

Our Old Testament reading tells the experience of a great prophet as a youth. The Lord sees Samuel before Samuel is even mature enough to recognize the Lord’s majesty and wonder. It is a

story that thrills and chills. How so? Well, even as a child, the Lord sees the kind of servant that Samuel will become. In the child, God recognizes the adult. His potential and integrity are evident because the Lord sees his heart. When Samuel says aloud these words: “Speak Lord because your servant is listening”, he does not hold back or issue a time restriction on this commitment. Samuel gives a lifelong promise. This is thrilling.

As the Lord blesses Samuel, he pronounces judgement on the house of Eli. Remember, it is Eli who is training Samuel and mentoring him into the role of priest. This disabled and diminishing old man is one whom we cannot help but view with sympathy. His family will go down in history as a disgrace because his sons choose not to follow the Lord. This is a chilling and disturbing revelation. The God who sees all does not have selective vision. He takes in the good with the corrupt; the pure with the vile; integrity of purpose as well as evil intent.

This theme echoes in Paul’s sharp message to the immature Corinthian church. The Corinthian believers had to learn what it means to be followers of Christ in the midst of a culture with contrary values. The citizens of Corinth, because of their trade route location and temple worship practices, promoted sexuality of all types. For Christians, such behavior is identified as impure. Immoral sexual expression was as normal in Corinth as shopping in the market. There was no shame or restriction in sexual acting out. What happens in Corinth, stays in Corinth. Paul steps in to give advanced instruction in Christian living. Uniting with the Lord has implications for soul and body. Acceptable cultural sexuality may be offensive to Christian purity. The Lord sees.

The Holy Spirit resides within the body of the believer to join the human heart to the Eternal God. There is a special presence of a holy God that comes to dwell within us. Christians are to live in community with purity because we are not our own, we were brought at a price. Paul concludes: “Therefore, honor God with your bodies.” The Lord who sees all that we are has expectations for all that we do. Living in purity is our response to being seen fully, totally, and completely. There are no secrets or privacy walls when it comes to the eyes of the Lord.

Before this awareness leaves us crippled with shame, the Psalmist gives us a refreshing prayer. Ps 139 is one of those that we should return to again and again. Its central theme is that we are fully seen and lovingly known. As believers, this is a prayer to recite in response to the realization that the Lord sees us, knows us, loves us, and nourishes our hearts. We were known from the very moment that we were knit together in our mother’s womb. We praise him because we are fearfully and wonderfully made. The creator who starts with nothing and weaves us into existence, invests and watches over us. This awareness is a delightful and comforting truth.

Our lectionary brings these passages together so that we are reminded of his watchful eye, comprehensive vision, and nurturing kindness. Dear worshiper at St Mark, you are seen, known and in spite of patterns where you fall short, as a follower of Jesus who openly confesses your sin, you are loved. Praise the Lord.

IV. Lessons to contemplate under the Fig Tree

A century ago, the holiday ritual for churches like St. Mark would be to prepare gifts to send to orphanages. Disease, poverty, war, and natural disasters left far too many children helpless and

homeless. Children were gathered into large homes that provided care. Like the foster care system today, despite good intentions, not all went smoothly in those substitute homes. By the 1930's, it was evident that the mortality rate of children in orphanages was far out of whack with the child mortality rate overall. The orphanage death toll was proportionately higher than for children who lived with their parents. The solution postulated was to keep cleaner and more sterile orphanages. Young infants were kept in separate cribs and spaced at a distance from one another (social distancing). Sterilized sheets were hung between cribs (shields). Caretakers followed cleaning routines and resisted having spontaneous contact that might spread germs (wash often...sound familiar?). Despite the best efforts of caretakers, too many infants and young children continued to die in these places of refuge.

An Austrian psychoanalyst and physician, Rene Spitz, came up with an alternate theory in the 1940s. He believed that infants kept in institutions suffered not from excess germs but from the deprivation of love and touch. In order to test his theory, he began to collect data and follow two groups of infants. One group was located in those isolated but sterile hospital cribs and the others were in literally in a state prison but were cared for by their incarcerated mothers. If germs were the culprit, the prison population should logically have the higher mortality rate. If being kept with other kids was the problem, then both groups should have equal mortality rates. The prediction of course is that the hospitalized children would be found healthier than the kids raised in a filthy prison by unfit mothers.

Since this is a famous psychological research study, most can predict the actual findings. Rene Spitz presented data that love is an essential childcare ingredient. Perhaps love cannot be seen, but it does have a protective effect on the well being of children. 37% of the infants kept in bleak hospital wards perished, but there were no deaths among the infants raised in the prison. The incarcerated babies grew more quickly, were larger and did better in every way Spitz could measure. The orphans who managed to survive the hospital, in contrast, were more likely to contract all types of illnesses. They were scrawny and showed obvious psychological, cognitive and behavioral problems. More children were lost in the hospital than in the prison. Prison mothers, no matter how morally inept, were to be preferred over sterile professional hospital caretakers. Go figure. Child welfare policies changed forever.

Here is the lesson. Being seen and lovingly known is a necessary condition to raise a healthy child. For us living in a civilized and educated nation, this is no surprise. Here is the addition from Scripture. From the first days when Adam and Eve were placed in the Lord's garden, God's intention was to bathe his creatures in love and attention. Human beings need touch & care not only from one another but from our Creator. Fortunately, the Lord is happy to oblige.

V. Application: Speak Lord for your servant is listening

Samuel gives us the words to speak when the Lord calls: "Speak Lord for your servant is listening." The Psalmist places words of response into our mouths to openly acknowledge his recognition:

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret

place...All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Nathanael gives us words to declare the Lordship of Jesus over our lives: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

Jesus gives us this promise. When you come to faith because you experience the beauty that you are fully seen and lovingly known, you will live on to see” heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Jesus speaks of the day ahead when the division between heaven and earth will dissolve. Heaven and earth will be his dwelling place. Until then, rest in this truth: you are fully seen and lovingly known. Listen to him speak and follow him.