

Noticing the People Around Us

(Lamentations 3: 19-33; Psalm 30; **Mark 5: 21-43**)

There's an ancient Japanese folk tale that was adapted by Japanese Christians in recent times to illustrate an interesting biblical idea. The story is about a man who dies and finds himself transported to a realm of beauty and brilliant light. Standing at the gate, he is approached by a silent angel who ushers him into a huge banquet hall in which a seemingly endless table is laid out with the most incredible array of delicacies he has ever seen. He is seated at the banquet table with many, many others, and a rich selection of aromatic food is placed before him.

As he picks up his chopsticks and prepares to eat, the same angel approaches from behind and straps a long board to the back of both of his arms so that he cannot bend his elbows. Try as he will, he cannot pick up the food. Twisting and turning, with arms out straight, it's impossible. He cannot manoeuvre to feed himself. Looking down the table, he notices that all the other people around the table have their arms similarly strapped to boards so that they cannot bend their arms either. They grunt and groan as they try in vain to get food to their mouths. The smell of the food is tantalizing, so strongly enticing they would do anything just for one taste. But they cannot; and the banquet hall is filled with great wailing and moaning. The man turns to the angel standing near him and says, "This must be hell!" Silently, the angel nods in agreement. "But what about heaven?" asks the man. "How is heaven different? I would give anything to see it."

Instantly the angel shows him into another huge banquet hall in which there is another great table, filled with an equally delectable array of food, the air filled with the same delicious aromas. "Ah," says the man, "this is more like it!" And sitting down quickly, he is about to pounce on his bowl once again when the silent angel comes around from behind and once again ties a long board to the back of his arms so that, just as before, he cannot bend his elbows to feed himself. Whining to himself that this is the same maddening situation as hell, he looks around and to his dismay and he notices that, at this table, there *is* something different. There is no wailing or moaning. Instead of people trying desperately to feed themselves, straining against rigid unbending arms, here each person is holding his or her arm out straight to the side, which nicely reaches the bowl of the person beside him, and each is then feeding the person beside them. Everyone in this room is completely satisfied. The air is filled not only with heavenly aroma, but also with sounds of joy. "So, this is heaven!" the man finally realizes. And once again the angel nods in agreement.

The story illustrates in a novel way the biblical suggestion that we should, at the very least, *notice* the people *beside* us. And *when* we notice the people next to us, then we might perhaps notice their need and possibly take steps to provide or perform what is needed.

In our gospel text this morning there are some curious pairings of characters who might not ordinarily notice each other. There is a crowd situation in which it would be hard to notice *any one* person in particular. And there is a remarkable Teacher in the story who *does* notice what others cannot or will not, and who is happy to give what each person needs most.

Today is a good day to visit Mark's gospel—we get two complete stories for the price of one today! With a further bonus, because Mark rarely just “tells” a story, he builds and shapes and *arranges* it first. And if he tells *two* stories, he doesn't just lay them out in sequence, telling one after the other. Mark does something far more interesting and appetizing—he'll make a *slice* in the middle of the *one* story, like you might in a fresh loaf of bread, and then he'll slip the other story right in the middle, just like the meat in a sandwich. In that arrangement, the two stories will interact with each other, perhaps even interpret each other, and the contrasts between the two will be especially sharp and very noticeable.

The story that starts and finishes our text, works like the *slices of bread* in the sandwich. It's about a young girl from a wealthy and powerful family. Her father is the *president* of the local synagogue. Not to be confused with the *rabbi* of the synagogue, who actually has to *work* there, the president is *lay* person and his job is more of an honorary position, but it is also one of *control*—he directs the content of worship, selecting the text, choosing the music, attending to all the details. He is a man who *makes* things *happen*. He is respected, and his orders are followed. When this man's adolescent daughter falls gravely ill, he “arranges” for her healing. He approaches a man reputed to *have* such power, and he *orders* (more than asks) the healer to *come* to his house, *quickly*, without delay. That sick young girl certainly had a powerful advocate in the person of her father. One who would look out and *speak* out for her needs. One who, if he could not do the healing himself, could at least *make it happen*.

The *other* story, in the *middle* of the sandwich, is like the *meat* but you may begin to wonder if it's gone “best before” date. Contrasted with a young girl on very the threshold of life, here stands an old woman with a lifetime of suffering. Her medical condition has not been cured and that has rendered her “unclean” according to Jewish Law for twelve years now, meaning that she is outcast and unwelcome, forbidden to touch or to *be* touched. Her physicians have not relieved her suffering in the least, yet they have *completely* relieved her of her *cash*. Not only desperate with her disease but now destitute of means, with no one to *speak for* her, no one to *arrange* a healing for her, she too will seek out one reputed to have power in these matters—the one spoken of in whispered tones, the one who makes the crowds buzz. Yet she *dare* not speak aloud. She shouldn't even *be* in this crowd. She must not touch him, nor anyone else. But maybe if she can just touch his *coat*, just down there on the hem, on the outermost edge, just a glancing touch. Maybe. Maybe that would be enough.

I firmly believe that sometimes the word “maybe” can express *faith* and *hope*. Perhaps not the *confident* faith of a mover and shaker, or the *eloquent* faith of a natural leader, or the *powerful* faith that sounds more like a “memo to God” than a sincere prayer. But for some folks, sometimes, a “maybe” can speak faith, it can *open a door* and it can give Jesus Christ an opportunity to do what *he* can do.

It is not surprising, though nonetheless interesting, that no one *else* in the crowd *noticed her*, though I suppose that after twelve years of haemorrhaging, she really could keep a low profile. It’s a wonder she could stand at all. If she turned sideways, you probably couldn’t see her. How *Jesus* could notice her, through one brief touch of his coat in the press of a crowd, is a miracle *already*. But *notice* her he *does*, and he seeks her out, he urges her to speak and he listens to her whole story. He publicly praises her “maybe” faith. He says out loud that it was *her faith*, more than the hem of his coat, that was at work in her healing. In taking notice of her, Jesus healed far more than her physical suffering. He also took notice of her deepest need, something that went even deeper than her medical condition, and it’s there, at that very *deepest* level, that his *grace* meets her faith.

Meanwhile, back at the sandwich, every minute that Jesus spends noticing this desperate nameless old woman, the tension is mounting and the clock is running out on that precious daughter of a powerful man. Mark doesn’t spell this out for us in his typically too-brief comments, but think about this—do you honestly think Jairus (that’s the young girl’s father) stood quietly, waiting patiently while Jesus was wasting precious time on this desiccated old nobody who had brushed up against his coat? Do you think Jairus was happy that Jesus took the time to identify the woman and her need, and then to listen to her whole life-story? And then when the unthinkable happens, when the news comes that the young girl has indeed died, do you suppose Jairus told Jesus, calmly and politely, that he needn’t bother to come now? Thanks anyway. Nice of you to *think* of coming. Maybe next time.

I suspect there may well have been a very stormy blast unleashed in the direction of Jesus, probably up close and real personal, if not from that girl’s father then certainly from the *crowd* tagging along, because *they* knew which of the two was the more important and which errand was the more urgent. The crowd *always* knows which side *their* bread is *battered* on.

How Jesus was able to keep his focus on that young girl he had *not yet met*, is *no less* miraculous than his ability to pick from a crowd someone who just happened to touch his coat. Yet his focus is clear and his notice of this girl is equally deep and surprisingly *accurate*. Those people in the house who had pronounced the girl dead, well, they must have trained with the physicians who treated that poor old woman, because their *diagnosis* was *faulty*—and as *hard* on the ears as their *wailing* after the fact. These ones *also* hurl abuse at Jesus and ridicule *his* diagnosis, but he does somehow manage to send them away. And then, with a quiet, tender word he summons the girl simply to “Get up!”

When Jesus takes notice of a person, whether rich or poor, whether powerful or powerless, what he *does* and what he *gives* is purely and simply *on the basis* of need. From the depth of compassion and with unwavering faith, he will notice the person and the need, and he will supply with pure grace what is missing, what has been lost, what has been stolen away from them.

Through his own example *and* through his command to his disciples, I think it's clear that we Christians were meant to notice the persons next to *us*, and to notice right down to the level of *needs*. We are not excused or justified in *ignoring* anyone, much less in turning a blind eye or a deaf ear to their needs. Of all people in this world, Christians ought to be truly distinctive in this, that we *will* notice, and will *not fail* to notice, the people around us, including those who have only recently arrived, and those who exist generally beneath the social radar, and even those who try very hard to fade into the background or to escape all notice.

Christians are supposed to notice not only what goes on around, but *who* it goes on *to*. This, people, is justice, but on the model of *grace*, not law or politics. This is not merely the ethics of issues and definitions and acceptable losses and agreeable convenience, but rather this is the ethics of *people* and their nature and their needs. We are called to be like our Lord in this matter—*noticing the people* above all else. And *when* we notice the people and needs that all the others have successfully ignored, then we must *continue* to follow our Lord, showing like he did that the healing journey must be prepared to take detours on behalf of the powerless, and to take time perhaps at the expense of those who claim to have no time or who will not wait, for anything, ever. Jesus not only *had* time and *made* time for the person next to him, not only noticed the person, but realized also that the kingdom that he came to embody pointed to a day when *all* would be attended to and *no* one would *ever* be ignored.

I think this crowded world is still crying out for time and attention, crying to be noticed. People everywhere, and in some places even more than others, are *dying* to be noticed. Orphans by the millions, *refugees* by the hundreds of millions, the extremely poor by the *billions*. The invisible and the disappeared are still crying out to be seen. The silenced ones still scream to be heard. People need to be noticed, don't they? Well, says Jesus, *that's* our mission field!

Rev. Steven K. Smith
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
June 27, 2021