

Sermon 08-22-10 “Let’s Look At Each Other”

In the wonderful play “Our Town” by Thornton Wilder Emily cries out “Let’s look at each other!” In the Gospel from Luke this morning Jesus looks at a crippled woman, calls her over and her life is changed. What about us? Do we really “see” each other? It matters.

In just about another week schools begin classes and life changes after Labor Day in different ways for a lot of people. It’s exciting for some people, and anxiety producing for others—maybe moving to new schools, new neighborhoods, even a new church. We have many visitors and newcomers in the fall—will they be comfortable with our “Episcopal drill” and new faces, when they come here?

Have you ever felt uncomfortable in a new situation? Raise your hand only if you’ve never felt uncomfortable in a new situation!

It’s pretty natural to be uncomfortable in a new situation—I still am. Since it’s back to school time I remember moving in Springfield, Missouri from Campbell elementary neighborhood school to a Jarrett junior high 7th grade class with a whole mix of school backgrounds. It was more than uncomfortable. I had skipped a grade, and many of my new

classmates were six or eight inches taller than I was. Looking back, I think I remember how my new classmates looked at me—especially the girls!

But maybe the most uncomfortable time I remember was soon after my ordination I decided to go to a retirement reception for a rector of one of the big “cardinal” parishes in the diocese. I was well prepared, fortified by my new oxford gray suit and my new clergy collar, and what I thought was a friendly smile on my face. But that wasn’t enough. I tried to mix around for 20 or 30 minutes and then gave up. Not one person in this highly affluent and educated parish crowd ever looked at me. Well, not really looked at me—I do remember some glazed eyes from people looking past me as if I were a plate glass window.

I left quietly, only to meet on the sidewalk the beloved retired bishop of the diocese coming in, who greeted me with a smile and the question “Can just anybody go in there?” I’m not sure I remember my answer.

But it did remind me of something I heard once: “After World War II, why did the British have to leave India? –it was the look in their eye!”

I’ve also known something about the glazed eyes, looking past and beyond me. If you think about it,

most of us can identify at least a little with the woman in the gospel story and what it must have meant to her when Jesus met her, "saw her" as the scripture says. At the core of Jesus' personal observance of all the Jewish practices was the depth he had in observing people—the blind man, the woman scorned, and this morning, the one so crippled by a spirit for eighteen years, and not even able to stand up straight.

We don't know much from Luke about all that transpired with Jesus and the crippled woman because Luke is in a hurry to make a follow-up point right after this, about God's priorities and Sabbath observance. But we know from other reports of Jesus' healing episodes that Jesus did more than touch and heal the woman. We know that compassion is Jesus first instinct. My hunch is that Jesus didn't just "see" her. He looked at her, deep into her, with compassion as he says to her "woman, you are set free from your ailment."

One can only guess what had gone on in this woman's life to cause her to be so misshapen and that was Jesus' concern. So he looked at her in such a way as to embrace her whole life and being

We can easily conjecture that the woman's self-esteem was so damaged by eighteen years of being

put down, undervalued and ridiculed that she no doubt felt she didn't deserve to stand tall. She didn't even feel she could ask Jesus to heal her: he was the one who made the first move to set her free from her ailment, communicating the message to the woman that he spent his entire ministry to convey—that God loves exactly who she is and she is worth more than anyone had ever communicated to her before. Jesus really saw her, with a gaze that radiated compassion.

“And immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.’ The woman was more than changed, she had become transformed. Or to be more precise, she had become the woman that God had created her to be in the first place.

There is a degree to which I think her story could be our story. You'll be happy to know that I can't read minds, but I can guess that if you're like me we've all had times when we endured actions and attitudes about ourselves that have caused us mentally to stoop our shoulders, be disappointed in ourselves, even lose hope for our possibilities. We also are in need of a fresh start with God's healing power, and it is as available to us as it was to her.

Where can I find that healing power? It's because of Jesus that I know God to be a God who not only loves me beyond measure but believes in me-- believes in

my capacity to become the person God created me to be. And that is true of every single person on this earth, including you.

Opening ourselves to the loving gaze and healing touch of Jesus helps that message to come through to us. No matter who we are or where we are in our lives, we need more than just some changes, we need a transformation, becoming a new being, which doesn't mean someone we're not, but becoming who we genuinely are, fully are. As Peanuts creator Charles Schultz said, "Life is like a ten-speed bike. Most of us have gears we haven't even used yet."

I think of that as I look forward with you to our fall program "Building Connections" and think of the spiritual formation opportunities we have to explore those gears and possibilities!

God offers that to us in every moment. Jesus' objective was to call people to a new vision of the way things ought to be with God, with themselves and with the world. He called that vision the "Kingdom of God" and said it is "at hand", "within you," "in your midst." The only thing standing between you and its final arrival is awareness of your need for transformation and your response to God's healing initiative.

If you know the play at all you may remember that there is a wistfulness to the story of Emily in the play “Our Town”. She dies in childbirth but is being allowed by the stage-manager to relive her 12th birthday—not as she would have wished it would be, but as it was.

She finds that ordinary life is just everyone talking past one another. So she pleads with her mother, “But just for a moment we’re all together. Mama, just for a moment we’re happy. Let’s look at each other!” she cries. But the tragedy for Emily was that she had taken life and the people around her too much for granted.

“Our Town” is a play and we know how it ends. This is real life this morning. Emily’s tragedy of taking life and the people around her too much for granted, has often become our tragedy.

But if we believe that the healing power of the resurrection life of Jesus is a serial story that goes on through history, we know that the loving gaze of Jesus, the healing spirit of the risen Lord, can radiate off of the Bible’s printed page and into OUR crippled and needy lives.

We have a chance for a fresh start, “Let’s really look at each other!” AMEN!