

Thursday, October 27, 2022

NOTICING OUR NEIGHBOR

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"During my second year of nursing school," a student described, "Our professor gave us a pop quiz. I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions until I read the last one: "What is the first name of the woman who every morning is cleaning the building?" Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was a tall, dark-haired, Hispanic woman, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank. Before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our grade. "Absolutely," said the professor. "In your work you will meet many people each day. Every one of them is significant. They deserve your attention and kindness, even if all you do is smile and say 'hello'. "I've never forgotten that lesson. I also learned her name was Juanita."

What about you? Do you know the name of the janitor at your work? Or the name of the woman you always see at the Super Market cash register? Or the post office worker? Or the gas attendant? Let's even get closer to home – do you know the names of all those you see here in Church every week? How about the newer members who have joined our church in the past years?

Noticing those around us, and expressing God's love through a welcoming smile, a kind greeting, a polite acknowledgement, and especially through an encouraging, uplifting word can mean so much to those around us. And from the Christian point of view, such deliberate actions incarnate our faith in a very visible manner. We can't talk about our love for God if we don't offer concrete love to our neighbor. Divine love for neighbor can never occur solely in abstract intentions and ideas. Love must be tangible and actual.

St. Paul describes love in one of the most beautiful chapters of the Bible (1 Corinthians 13) as being patient and kind, not boastful, arrogant, or rude; it is not irritable or resentful, and does not insist on its own way. Before all else, divine love means noticing the other, and then acting in a Christ-like manner! Kindness, gentleness, goodness, politeness, joyfulness, and the such can be concrete ways of expressing God's love to others.

Our society has become too rude, and mean-spirited. We often simply ignore those we pass by, but sometimes, instead of offering a kind word we are quick to say something harsh if they annoy us.

Whenever I walk pass someone on the street, in a store, or get in an elevator, I try to look people in the eye and greet them with a joyous smile. Yet, most people keep their head down and simply want to pass by without acknowledging me. Divine Christian love is first of all about noticing the other, and then responding in a Christ-like manner! We can't just talk about Christian love but we have to live it!

We can see a tangible example of this in the Gospel story of today. We hear about a Rich Man who lived a prosperous, yet isolated life, where he ate sumptuously, dressed exquisitely, and enjoyed each and

every day in celebration and festivity. Right outside his door, however, laid Lazarus, a pathetic figure suffering in his poverty from illness and want.

Although Christ condemns the rich man and praises Lazarus, we must take care to note why Jesus condemned the rich man. The rich man's sin was not his wealth. The Church does not see riches and prosperity as sins, although the Bible clearly warns us about the dangerous temptations riches and wealth create for anyone in their journey towards God. Wealth and comfort can turn us away from our dependence on God. Riches can harden our hearts against the needs of others. Comfort and material security can make us feel fuel our pride where we forget that all good gifts – including our talents, our abilities, our brains, and our opportunities – come from God. Basically, wealth and riches are a dangerous temptation because they can lead us away from faith.

Yet, despite all this talk about riches as a dangerous temptation, today's Gospel lesson does not focus on that. Instead, it points to another danger. The Gospel contrasts the fact that just outside the door of the rich man laid the pathetic figure of Lazarus. Each day the rich man walked out his door, Lazarus was there. Every day the rich man returned home, Lazarus was there. The Gospel lesson today is all about compassion and kindness, about noticing those in need all around us.

The deadly sin of the rich man, which condemns him to hell, is his inability, or maybe unwillingness, to notice the poor man's plight right outside his house. He either did not see Lazarus, or more likely he consciously ignored the desperate figure! By ignoring this person, by not taking the time to notice and see Lazarus as a fellow child of God, the rich man failed in one of the most basic principles of faith. From the beginning of time, when Cain asked God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God responded quite bluntly, "Yes! Each one of us is our brother's and sister's keeper!"

And not only is the person outside our door our brother or sister, they are also an image of Jesus Christ Himself. "I was hungry. I was thirsty. I was naked. I was alone. I was sick and in prison. I was in desperate need! Did you notice me? Whatever you did to the least of my brothers or sisters, those who are outside your doorstep crying out for help, you did to me!"

Noticing those around us and offering a smile of love, a gesture of kindness, a word to lift up and encourage are all ways we live out our Christian faith in simple, yet profound ways! And by noticing others, we actually acknowledge Christ!

So, tomorrow when we walk past the person cleaning your office building, or go into the post office, or get a coffee from the Dunkin Donut's drive through window, notice the person right in front of you and give them your full attention. And the next time you walk past a homeless person or someone who seems a bit lost and confused, or simply struggling through life, be present to them and offer them concrete love and kindness.