



“See Me”

Text: Matthew 25:31-26

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I don't know if any of you had this video come across your feed online, but I recently watched a video about a man named Brian Peterson. In 2015 Brian and his wife, Vanessa, moved to Santa Ana, CA. They had a desire to love their neighbors unconditionally and sacrificially. One night he heard a homeless man start screaming on the street below his fourth floor apartment. The agony in the man's voice gripped his heart. This man, he thought, is my neighbor and I am called to love him. It was from that one night, plus the burning desire placed in his heart to love his neighbor that Faces of Santa Ana was born.

What he did after that night was to go and talk to the homeless on the streets around him. He would listen to their stories. After he heard their stories there were two things that he did. He would paint their portrait and he would try to track down family online. He has successfully reconnected many homeless with their loved ones. Some were able to return to their families, but others were still on the streets. That's where the second part of his work began. He began selling the portraits to help these men and women whose faces he painted. He soon realized they needed more than the money from the sale of a painting. They needed housing, food, and other social services. He managed to connect many people with services for housing and in the process has changed so many lives. But it doesn't even stop there. Faces of Santa Ana expanded to be Faces of Mankind. Artists in many other cities, including Miami, Detroit, several in California, and even overseas in the United Kingdom are now painting portraits of their homeless neighbors and making a difference with the money and services they are able to provide. Brian's goal is that many more artists will take up this cause.

There are two things that stand out for me in this story. The first is that he felt a call to respond to the call in Matthew 25, which was actually cited in one story I read about him. He wanted to love his neighbor with an intentionality to put that love into action by helping the homeless in some tangible way. And the second thing, which stems from the first, is that he talked to his neighbors. He got to know them. He listened to their stories. Most of all, he saw them for who they are, beloved children of God.

I mentioned this a little last week, but in our passage the idea of seeing is important. It's what makes the difference of who goes to heaven and who doesn't in this parable. It's not that the goats can't see. It's just that they allow themselves to be distracted by other sights. Sights that are pleasing. It's easier to go about enjoying the finer things in life if we don't look too closely at the dire situation so many live in. That's why over time the poor have been pushed into housing near industrial areas where industrial pollution and food deserts cause health issues. And then they have to choose between food or medicine or decent clothing.

I read an article some time ago about the topic of Death with Dignity. It dealt with one aspect of euthanasia with the poor. I don't remember if this article was written here in the US or in some other country, but probably our poor would be facing similar challenges as poor in other developed nations. One thing that came up over and over again was that they really didn't want to die, but they had no family to assist them, it was a daily struggle to live with illness and try to get food and other necessities to live; and, in the end, the easier solution was to just end it. They want what everyone wants - to be loved and cared for, to live life to its fullest without so much struggle, to live and die with dignity. See me, they seem to say, but we don't. We know about them. We see them on the streets. But so many of us don't really see them. One speaker at the conference said they have had a "cloak of invisibility placed around them", that if we don't see them then we can't feel bad about what they are going through. Invisible. Unseen.

One thing that gets to me these days is the extreme right's view that if we talk about slavery, if we talk about poverty, if we talk about injustice in America, then we are making white people feel guilty and they didn't have anything to do with slavery. And that is true. Slavery and issues like systemic poverty were all put in place long before any of us were born. Slavery in its known form ended, but slavery and poverty evolved in different ways over the decades and centuries - sweat shops, human trafficking, redlining. But Jesus never says we are to feel guilty about these situations. He never says we are to flagellate ourselves in penitence. We are, however, called to see, really see, and then do something about it.

One speaker said that Matthew 25 calls us into social introspection. What are the problems and what can I do to change those structures and systems that hold certain groups down? We are invited to see differently, to see with the eyes of God. And then when we see to become engaged in more effective work to change the power structure, to create a more equitable society. We can be involved in the construction of a new and more equitable system. That is the goal of the Matthew 25 Initiative.

I see you. I see your hunger, your fear, your hopelessness. Let me help you take the cloak of invisibility off because I see you. All of you.

I have to admit that I haven't always been that socially aware and when I have been it was to do what so many of you here have been involved in - helping at a soup kitchen, going on a habitat build, and those kinds of things. I've never really thought about having the power to help create a radical change in society. There's always been this frustration of feeling helpless in the face of the so much need, but that's what is so exciting about this Initiative. It excites me to see the denomination attempting to have a very real impact on our society and around the world as we work on this initiative with our PC(USA) churches here, with ecumenical and interfaith relationships in our own communities, and with our partner churches throughout the world. Coming together as God's voice, hands, feet, and heart to bring change to a hurting world. No guilt, but a challenge to roll up our sleeves and respond to God's call to see.

How this should, could, play out for this church is something I can't answer. One God One Community ended when the Israeli-Hamas war broke out. It was a difficult time and still is. However, Adrian Brooks and Gary Mazo initiated a new interfaith committee with Mayor Terry. They will vision and plan and hopefully all churches will be invited to participate. I'm not sure if this will include actual hands-on work or more educational type things like OGO was doing before with educating about our sameness and our differences. I would hope that they would be more hands-on, such as getting volunteers to help tutor children in reading and math, helping to build ramps for the physically challenged to be able to get into their homes more easily and things like that. That would be one of my visions for the interfaith network. CAJE has done a good job, from what I have seen and heard about it, in making some big changes for the community. It would be nice to also have joined hands on work being done as well.

While this church wasn't invited to be a part of this new interfaith committee as they were looking for church leaders who could commit for two to two and a half years, and if I'm still here in two and a half years then you and I both will be in shock, but hopefully this committee will come up with ideas and we will be invited to be a part of those plans to make Evansville a better place for everyone; that the aspirational goal of E being for Everyone will truly begin to be a reality.

I was homeless and you saw me and gave me shelter. I was hungry and you saw my hunger and you gave me food. I was a stranger and you saw me and welcomed me into your home. I was in prison for a crime I didn't commit and you saw me and came to visit me and you fought for my freedom, you fought to end the school to jail pipeline. I was a single mother, struggling to work and to provide for my children and you saw my need and came and helped me through support and care and encouragement. You saw and helped and when you saw and helped these my children, you helped me. Let us open our eyes and see and together through our love and commitment to Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has given to us so abundantly, let us go and see and do. Amen.

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