



A Time to See Someone Now

August 21, 2022 – The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: May Your Word only be spoken and may your Word only be heard: In the Name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

There's a gesture that used to be part of popular culture. I think it comes from a Robert DeNiro comedy of some years ago, in which he has a difficult relationship with his son-in-law, whom he doesn't like or trust. He points at his eyes with two fingers. The gesture says, "You may be up to no good, but I've got you in my sights. Don't misstep. I'm judging you to be untrustworthy." With or without that physical gesture, this is one way we can look at people, or see people: with judgment and suspicion.

When we were in the Holy Land, we were often met with people who wanted to sell us things—plastic rosaries or prayer beads, bookmarks or postcards with pictures of holy sites, sprigs from olive trees and rosemary bushes, replicas of ancient coins. It could be uncomfortable. Even as affluent Westerners, we couldn't buy everything. Did we at least acknowledge their presence in saying "no," or did we just ignore them, and keep walking? We had to decide: if she looks at me, will I look at her, or will I avert my eyes?

I bet each of us has had that experience, of choosing not to look at someone, because we are embarrassed—either by their need and vulnerability, or because we judge them to be a failure of some sort, or because we are embarrassed by our inability to act, or our uncertainty, about what to do.

Or maybe we've had that experience, innocent enough, of being somewhere and seeing someone you really didn't want to talk to, for whatever reason—maybe you're at the store making a beeline for the ice cream in the freezer and suddenly you make an abrupt about face and hope he hasn't seen you as you do some other shopping first.

Or maybe we've been on the other side of that non-look, of not being seen. Maybe as a child we'd raised our hands in class and the teacher didn't see us, or we weren't picked for a team. Or maybe we are not seen in our workplace. Or in our own families. Or maybe we've been in a conversation where the person was constantly looking over our shoulder, intent on someone else. I had a colleague in the Diocese, now no longer here, who used to be that way. It infuriated me.

There's a movie that came out about 10 years out which illustrates this idea of being invisible. It's called "The Butler," loosely based on the life of Gene Allen, an African American man who served 8 Presidents, from Eisenhower through Reagan. The lesson he embodied, from the cotton plantation he was born on through his career as a butler was, "The room should feel empty when you're in it."

This is not how *Jesus* operates. Jesus sees. And the seeing brings healing and liberation.



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Luke tells us that Jesus is in the synagogue one morning, and a woman who has been severely deformed for 18 years appears. And the text says: Jesus SAW her, laid hands upon her, and she stood straight up and was healed.

Jesus SAW her and her healing began. I wonder how long it had been since she had really been seen. I wonder how many times during those 18 years she had walked into the synagogue and people hadn't really seen her. Maybe all they saw was her deformity, her ailment. She was nothing more than the sum of her illness. Maybe people moved away from her, gave her space, because they didn't know what to do with her pain. Maybe that was the way she saw herself. Whatever other gifts or talents or relationships that enriched her life had taken a back seat to this chronic debilitating illness.

What we do know, is that Jesus saw her, and her healing and liberation began.

And what we also know is the leader of the synagogue had what seems to me, and maybe to you, the most appalling response: "You can't do that on the Sabbath! It's work!" It is worth noting that the Biblical texts in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy which forbid work *do not* specify precisely what sort of work is to be forbidden. The Mishnah, the collection of central, sacred Jewish teaching that interprets the Bible, defines 39 types of work that *are* forbidden on the Sabbath—for example sowing, baking, hunting, writing, building— but healing is not one of them. It turns out that where

Jewish teaching has been divided is not whether healing is permissible on the Sabbath, but whether or not "non urgent" healing is permissible. (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-21-3/commentary-on-luke-1310-17-5>) So, perhaps the synagogue leader is on solid ground when he says to the crowd, but really to the woman, "Couldn't you come back tomorrow for this?"

However, Jesus, a good Jew, is not buying that.

But perhaps we, you and I shouldn't jump too quickly on the synagogue leader. If you're like me, I imagine there have been times when someone's need to be seen heard or healed, hasn't fit in with your time able; when the obvious need for liberation or justice hasn't been convenient.

I know in my own life this has taken shape in my inability or unwillingness to think outside the box when someone's need doesn't fit with my need for order and predictability. Or when my need to be right, squelches another person's need to be heard and validated. Or when my need for privilege, or fear of losing it, trumps another's need for liberation.

I'm reminded of Martin Luther King's letter from the Birmingham Jail, written in 1963 in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement:



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For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

The Gospel invites us to act now for the freedom, healing and liberation of others, even when it may be inconvenient for us. It may be taking baby steps to stop climate change by buying energy efficient light bulbs, setting our air conditioning a little higher, our heating a little lower, buying more energy efficient appliances, driving less, eating less meat. Or maybe it's examining our attitudes and actions around gender identity or sexual orientation or class, or racial justice. (I note that we have a page on our website newly there by the Racial Justice Initiative, that helps us takes steps towards racial justice. It's under the "Serving" tab.) Or considering how we treat family members and friends. Are there ways that we are not seeing what they need for their flourishing?

Jesus wants us to see who or what needs to be seen, and then take action, beyond our convenience, to set them free.

Amen.