

Recognizing Jesus



Collect

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

First Reading *2 Corinthians 6:1-13*

As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,
"At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return-- I speak as to children-- open wide your hearts also.

The Gospel *Mark 4:35-41*

When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

This week a number of our community had the peculiar pleasure of knocking on the doors of our immediate neighbors in order to invite them to the fantastic inaugural Summer Fest that we so enjoyed here yesterday. On paper it all looked so easy: sun, good food, live music, beer, Pacific Beach – what could go wrong?

As it turned out, not much did go wrong because not much happened. We knocked, rang the doorbell: no one answered. Momentary and barely noticeable signs of life inside gave way to very impressive displays of playing dead, house after house. For my part, I managed at least to have one truly at-length conversation, a number of 'can't now I'm too busy' exchanges, and a lot of false starts. However, I do have a couple of favorites from that night that I would like to share with you if I may.

The first was with a man who did in the end open his door, all of about 9 inches. I think I managed to say at least the first half of my sentence: 'Hi there, I'm from the church across from the library and we...' before *he* replied 'We go to St. Brigid's' and then promptly closed the door in my face. As I finished the rest of my sentence in slow motion all I could hear was Gregory Jones laughing at me as he went on to the next house. I told Gregory that a person can go to hell for mocking a priest. He kept laughing anyway.

The second was more a case of what might have been. A few doors down from my 'We're from St. Brigid's' experience, I noticed a 'Wounded Warrior' poster in the window of a neighbor's house. I thought to myself, 'now this could be good,

we could talk about last year's Veteran's Sunday appeal'. Then I noticed in the next window a sticker for the NRA – the National Rifle Association. Feeling the need to make sure that I had back-up I called over to Kathy Jensen across the road, 'You're in the Marines, aren't you Kathy?' 'Yes', she replied. I felt safer, plus Kathy had Rocky with her, a several hundred pound wolf-like creature which can sniff out Catholics at 300 yards. Having rung the doorbell I noticed that there were several more NRA stickers and my mind began to wander. I just couldn't get the image of a Charlton Heston-like figure coming to the door, rifle cocked, and re-working the classic 1968 'Planet of the Apes' line, '*Get your stinking paws off my porch, you damned dirty priest*'. In the end no one answered, and I stepped bravely out into the failing light.

As I have reflected on that experience two things struck me: number one, the days of front door evangelism are over, my friends; and number two, the American front porch just ain't the place it used to be. In a former life when I lived back in England I had an entirely non-illustrious career – for about six weeks – as a door-to-door salesman. I sold, or at least I tried to sell, very bad plastic tupperware. They were the sort of products that no one truly needed, and even fewer ever wanted. The name of the company was rather ironically called 'Betterware', and every now and again their magnetic bottle openers and non-stick nylon spatulas visit me in my nightmares.

I have, therefore, you might say, coal-face experience of the front porch and its perils, and those porches tell a fascinating story about our contemporary culture.

Just take the Fuller Brush company, which was in many ways the icon of the door-to-door salesman of the 20th century. According to the *LA Times*, in its 1950's heyday, Fuller Brush had about 30,000 people going door-to-door. By the mid-1980's, in recognition of the increasing number of households with both adults working outside the home, Fuller Brush began moving beyond door-to-door to catalogues, and then 20 or so years later to the internet, and the finally in February, 2012, the company filed for bankruptcy. Not only for Fuller Brush but for many of us, the front porch has gone from being a meeting place between resident and community, to a space we move quickly through in order to make our safe passage inside away from the outside world.

Reflecting on the changing nature of face-to-face encounters around the home, I began to imagine what sort of answer we might have to this question: if Jesus came to the front door would we recognize him? You can imagine it, can't you, the second coming of Christ, and nobody notices. 'Oh, that was you', we might catch ourselves saying at the end of time, as our Lord comes to bring about a new heaven and a new earth, 'I wondered what all the noise was about'.

The second coming aside, it is true, isn't it, that we live in a time in our history when it would seem that Jesus is hard to recognize for the average person. Part of the challenge in recognizing Jesus in our contemporary society is that we often mistake him for someone else. Depending on your generation, Jesus is either the character in Cecil B. De Mille's *King of Kings* or the one in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. For others who encounter him beyond the biopic, the Jesus they may

come to see is the one who has very little to do with the Bible or even the Christian faith. For instance, Matt Stone, the co-creator and writer of the cult adult cartoon, *South Park*, says of the Jesus they portray: “We can do whatever we want to Jesus, and we have. We’ve had him say bad words. We’ve had him shoot a gun. We’ve even had him kill people.” Not really gentle Jesus, meek and mild is it.

If we, as the Church, are serious about people coming to recognize, coming to see and know Jesus, then we need to address a twin challenge. Firstly, that a vast proportion of the population knows nothing about Jesus at all. Secondly, that another large proportion that do know something about Jesus have gotten what they know from popular culture, whether it be *South Park* or Hollywood. Here's what Stephen Prothero of Boston University and author of the book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know--And Doesn't* says,

'Most Americans cannot name any of the Gospels. Most don't know that Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew Bible. And a sizeable minority think that Sodom and Gomorrah were a happily married biblical couple'.

The core to responding to this challenge, I believe, is learning how to recognize Jesus for ourselves. Now you may think that you already have that one down. You know Jesus, after all you come here don't you. Yet the biblical record suggests that even the people closest to him – his own disciples - struggled to see him straight. If we just glance back over the chapters that precede our gospel reading this morning we notice how in the presence of those very same disciples, Jesus had performed miracle after miracle of healing: a man with an unclean spirit, Peter's

mother-in-law, a leper, a paralytic, a man with a withered hand and then a multitude by the lakeside. Even with all of that which they had been witness to, when the storm came to surround them all they could see was their fear. Even after Jesus had calmed the storm, they still could not see him for who he was '*Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*'.

Pride, power, lust, anger, self-centeredness can all have an equally devastating impact on our ability to recognize Jesus in our lives. As Christians, we believe in an incarnate God and that Jesus lives in every human being and so that we *have* the opportunity to see Jesus in every human life. However, just because he *can* be seen doesn't mean that we *are* seeing him.

That said, we should not despair, for guidance and hope are at hand in the form of Paul's extraordinary letter to the church in Corinth. When Monica and I were preparing for our wedding service we searched for a scripture that expressed how we wished to orient ourselves both to each other and to the family and friends who had gathered with us that weekend. The scripture we chose was the same one read today from 2 Corinthians: '*our heart is wide open to you...open wide your hearts also.*'

If there is ever a description of the identity in Christ that we share here at St. Andrew's it is that: '*our hearts are open to you*'. This Sunday is 'Recognition Sunday', the last Sunday in our program year, and so an opportunity to give thanks for the ministry that has been done in Jesus' name in this community of faith. Over this year I have seen hearts open to others time and time again. From the weekly

dedication and love poured out at our hunger suppers, to the tireless commitment of those who staffed the Interfaith Shelter; from the weekly praising of God through music by our parish musicians, to the thoughtful preparation of food and drink and a smile by our hospitality teams week after week; from the sacred wondering of children shepherded by our Godly Play teachers, to the quiet dedication of our Altar Guild teams, our ushers, our greeters, our worship leaders; from the smallest act of loving-kindness in welcoming a stranger, to the hours spent pouring the self out for the care of another: hearts are open at St. Andrew's, and in those open hearts Christ is made known, Jesus is seen, and hope is recognized at last as real.

I am proud to be the rector of such a loving and giving church and what's more – as yesterday's almighty shin-dig proved – of a community that knows how to throw a party too! Don't ever give up on seeing Jesus in your life, especially when the storm seems to be rising and you need him most. Just turn to the good people of God that you have come to know and love here and to those whom you are only just coming to know, and you will see him for the Lord and Savior that he truly is: his name is Wonderful, Counselor, Prince of Peace, Mighty God, Everlasting to Everlasting, and may he ever walk with you.

Amen.