

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Our gospel text today picks up from the past weeks of Jesus talking about the challenges of waiting for the new age to come, a time that will be marked by God's vision of abundant justice and peace for all. There are a lot of unanswered questions in the air about being Jesus' disciples in the midst of waiting and about recognizing God's presence **while** they wait.

In this passage, Jesus describes a scene with two different groups- where some people may spend their time feeding the hungry, visiting the jailed, and helping the people most in need among them- and another group that does not do these things.

But what stands out to me is in this scene, BOTH groups didn't see Jesus' presence.¹ They didn't see God in who they are serving. It would seem that- at first- BOTH groups were clueless and NEITHER group recognized Jesus any more than the other.

If you are like me, you too are waiting for a new age, an end to the injustice all around us, the acts of hate, systemic inequalities, and the deep divisions that separate us. And we too have differing opinions how to bring that about and what we do in the meantime- during the wait. And sometimes, While every group digs into their own ideas of what change will look like,

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/november-22-roc-matthew-2531-46>

Whatever group we are in- we ALL have our blindspots when it comes to recognizing God's presence among us.

Sometimes it takes someone from completely outside your context to help you see your blindspots. For example, my Mexican colleagues when I worked at a nonprofit in Mexico, were able to teach me about my blindspot and the blindspot of many Christians in the US when it came to helping people in marginalized communities in Mexico. Over the years, they had many Christian groups from the US that sought to partner with them and try to help some of the most impoverished communities in the world that were found in Mexico.

They would describe the blindspot they observed with two Spanish words: *hacer* and *ser*. *Hacer* is the verb "to do" and *ser* is the verb "to be." When it came to serving marginalized communities in Mexico, a lot of US Christians only wanted to HACER- do/act/work/donate- it was hard for them "to just be"- SER.

So often we can get caught up in our ideas about charity and ending injustice- they become boxes to check off on our list of what we think it means to be a good Christian or a good ally. But we are at risk of our actions becoming just that- a performative action that we do to feel good about ourselves and where we risk missing God's presence ***completely***.

With this scene, Jesus depicts a type of active waiting that invites all disciples of Christ to not just help others in need so we can check it off our

list of good deeds, but to also **more deeply experience** God's abiding presence in those actions.

What I learned from my colleagues in Mexico, who often were members of the very communities they worked in and they themselves had lacked for food, lacked for clothes and lacked for clean water- is that God's presence is not just found in the action of someone helping them, but ALSO in the BEING- the relationship, the mutual connection, and the time spent with the individuals that desired to serve them and partner with them.

The actions described by Jesus indeed involve a chance to GO and BE with suffering individuals. In Jesus' time- before the internet and so many electronic ways of giving and serving- these actions implied time and relationship. Inviting a stranger into your home couldn't be done without sitting together for at least a few minutes. Visiting incarcerated people and people who were sick, involved time spent with others. In Jesus' time- giving a stranger a drink or giving food to the hungry- couldn't be done without being close enough that you would also have a conversation with them- maybe learn their name and their story.

Jesus tells his disciples, by following this way of being in the world, of showing up with suffering people and in places where suffering abounds, we not only follow in Jesus' own footsteps, we meet Jesus himself in a **deeper way than ever before.**

We too are invited to this deep experience of Jesus' presence.

While physically going and BEING with people in need during this time of pandemic is just not possible, it just means that we have had to get creative to not stay socially or psychologically distanced from people in need. To still follow Jesus' footsteps but not put anyone at risk to disease or harm.

I'd like to share one opportunity for you to do this today, right now in fact! You can write a letter or holiday card and send it to an immigrant in a Chicago-land jail. Write to me for the name and address of an individual, check out the instructions on our Advent 2020 web page and then you can either send it yourself or drop it off at the church for us to put postage on it and send it.

WPLC is joining with the ICDI in finding new ways to "BE" with these particular individuals in need across distance, legal obstacles, and across safety regulations. For the 5-10 minutes you write, you are centering them and their suffering, you put yourself in their place. And you affirm their humanity in light of not being able to be in the same space as them.

Jesus shows us with his life, tells us with this passage, we can more deeply experience his radical and abiding presence that shows up throughout Matthew, as we follow in his footsteps. This advent season, while we wait for the day when there will be no more suffering-- may we indeed experience God's presence in new and fresh ways as we follow in Jesus' cross-shaped path of ACTING AND BEING in this world.

Amen.