

Did You See Me?

Rev. John Allen

I attended college in a lovely town called Davidson, about 30 minutes north of Charlotte North Carolina.

The town has southern charm down to a science, roads lined with old blossoming trees, classic architecture, and a soda counter at the heart of Main Street that is straight out of the 1950s.

It is also a wealthy community. Pretty well insulated from the realities of poverty and homelessness that plague the city just to its south and the more rural working class towns all around.

Pretty well insulated. But not entirely.

Which led to a 911 call one night when a local woman, driving home from work, passed St. Alban's Episcopal Church and saw a homeless man, asleep on a bench in the church's garden.

She was afraid, she told the dispatcher, the folks in the neighborhood might be in danger.

What danger a sleeping man might pose, I couldn't say, but nevertheless the police sent a car over to have a look, if for nothing else to help quell her fear.

The officer arrived and, as I later heard him tell the story, immediately spotted the man, now scarcely visible in the dusky light, asleep on the bench with a blanket pulled over his head and wrapped all around him.

The officer pulled out his flashlight, from a distance, and shined it on the man, only to be met by an unexpected glint of metal.

The man, and his blanket were made of bronze. It was only a statue.

The officer, a bit relieved, laughed at himself for a moment, thinking what an odd statue this was for a church garden.

That is until he ran his flashlight along the length of the figure and saw his two feet, bare, sticking out from beneath the blanket, pierced, all the way through. The unmistakable wounds of the cross.

It was Christ.

That sculpture, simply titled "Homeless Jesus" had been commissioned by the church and installed earlier that day.

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Did you see me?

It might be Jesus' most haunting, and most challenging question.

He invites us to imagine that longed for moment, when our life reaches its end and we face the mystery of eternal life with God. He invites us to imagine, coming right before him, so he can ask.

Did you see me?

I was right there with you, all along.

I was poor. I was hungry. I was in prison. I was sick.

What you did to them. You did to me.

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Perhaps we might be forgiven. After all, so many of our images of Jesus are just so glorious. Bathed in light. Shining white robe. Soft features. Flowing hair. Floating in the air, ascending to heaven. Arms out stretched. Splendid.

So many of our images have halos. Jesus seems other-worldly. Like nothing we have seen before or since.

Like, nothing we would ever expect to drive past on in the dim light of dusk.

Perhaps you grew up in a church that had an image of Christ like that, in a window or a mural over the pulpit.

These glorious images of Christ have an important place in our devotion. They remind us of Christ's divinity. Christ's power. Christ's place as a Lord above all rulers and powers on Earth, no matter how mighty they may seem or claim to be.

We do not need to discard those images, or replace them. They show us something powerful. Sometime important. Something true.

But there is another side of Jesus. One that is a little less comfortable. A little less manageable.

Did you see me?

I was right there with you, all along.

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What you did to them. You did to me.

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That statue caused quite an uproar in our little town.

Sure there were plenty of folks who liked it, who really appreciated it's message.

But there were plenty of people in town who wanted to see it go.

Not just because it spooked the neighbors, but because some people found it downright offensive. I can vividly remember watching the local news one night to see one woman, a leader of the efforts to have the statue removed, who after several probing questions by the reported blurted out rather defensively, "Jesus was not a vagrant!"

I felt what she was saying. I heard it. And I get it.

“My Lord is powerful, conquering even over death, risen and sitting on the throne, at the right hand of God almighty. He doesn’t look like this. He can’t.”

But he does.

And that is the great scandal that lies at the heart of our faith. That the God of heaven and earth, maker and ruler of all, came to live as one of us, and set himself amongst the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed.

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If this passage feels like a challenge. It is.

If it makes you squirm in the pew. That’s fine. It actually makes me squirm a bit in the pulpit.

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But sit with it for a moment, and oddly there is a real great comfort this teaching from Jesus too.

Because when I stare up at a magnificent stained glass window with a resplendent Christ glowing down from on-high, I can't help but think. "What does he want with me?"

I mean if you think about it, if our only image of God is glorious, shining, and enthroned on high. What could God possibly want from us?

It's no wonder that for much of human history religious devotion consisted of dramatic rituals, sacrificing goats, and doves, and bulls, burning incense beneath golden statues, what else could we puny mortals do in the face of the might and power of God?

It must have been stressful, wondering if each earthquake or flood was a sign that something had not been done quite right.

But we had to try something.

And in that light Jesus' very challenging words also seem like a very relieving invitation.

You want to serve God?

Visit the sick.

Welcome the stranger.

Care for the poor.

We can do that.

And so week after week we gather here. In this simple sanctuary. Not to do anything dramatic. Not to try to win God's favor with an offering or a sacrifice.

We gather here to re-tune our hearts. So that we will walk out those doors and serve Christ wherever we meet him. In our family. In our neighbors. In strangers.

What you do to them. You do to me.

We gather here to practice a generous way of being, offering our resources, be they canned goods or pledge cards, to the ministry of this church. Not because what we will do here today is enough, but because it is good and right, because it points us in the right direction

and because in God's hands, it just might be a miracle.

We are gathering gifts, to support the ministry of this church to this community in all it's forms.

My friends, we Christians are the Stewards of a great truth. That God's love is for all people, it is without condition, it never ends, and it is stronger than everything, even death. And part of our job is to say that over, and over again.

But the most important function of a church like ours, is to make God's love real. That is to take this beautiful, but fairly abstract, idea of God's love and turn it into something.

Food on a table that would otherwise be bare.

A friendly face at the hospital bedside.

The only visitor a prisoner ever sees.

A call just to check in and see how you are doing.

The first time, in a long time, someone really heard that they were loved.

Communities supporting each other through recovery from addiction.

A voice in solidarity with the poor.

Music to soothe a weary soul.

A story that might transform a life.

That's what we make here. Little signs of God's love.

And the best part is, what we do for other people. We do for God.