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Sermon

R.L. Christensen

Sisters and brothers: When my children were very young we enjoyed playing the game “Hide and go seek.” It was a late afternoon event – just before dinner.

When it was my turn to hide, the children would wait in the kitchen with their Mom. While she was making dinner she would help them count to ten and they would shout at the top of their lungs, “Here we come, ready or not.”

Of course I was always ready. My competitive urge had me hiding in the very best places. A favorite was behind the shower curtain in the bathroom. Only the silliest people stand in the shower fully clothed. But, by now you know I am a few sandwiches short of a full picnic.

The kids would look here and there. Often searching in places where I could not possibly fit – even if I was inclined. On bad days they would give up, run to their Mom, and ask for hints. She would often rat me out. They would find me with great delight.

When it was the kids’ turn to hide, things were very different. They would hide in obvious places, and when I would pretend not to see them they would giggle, jump out, and shout, “Here we are.” Their joy was in being found. My joy was to act surprised and give them big hugs for being so clever.

In the Holy Gospel for today the phrase, “When was it that we saw you?” appears four times. Three times the sheep wanted to know when they saw Jesus and cared for his needs. One time the goats wanted to know when they should have seen Jesus, but missed him.

The answer to the four questions is the same. The sheep saw Jesus when they cared for the most vulnerable among them. The goats failed to see Jesus when they could not see him in the most vulnerable among them. Both the sheep and the goats were surprised. One group pleasantly. The other not so much.

Most scholars are quick to point out that the parable is addressed to “ta ethna” – the nations. First Century Jewish-Christian anthropology divided the world into two parts: the people Israel and all the rest of us – the nations. It is clear that the parable is addressed to those who are not aware that God has a purpose for their lives. But, that doesn’t let disciples off the hook. The parable can make us watchful so we see Jesus in the least of those that Jesus names as his family.

It is something of a “hide and go seek game” like the one the children and I played all those years ago. The nice thing – a very nice thing on any number of counts – is that Jesus is like my children and not like me. Jesus does not stand fully clothed behind the shower curtain.

Jesus cannot bear the thought of being hidden. Jesus is forever giggling or crying or shouting out loud, “Here I am – ready to be found – ready to smile at your great surprise and great joy in the discovery that I am in the world especially in the lives of the most vulnerable.”

When members of Shepherd of the Hills head down to the Issaquah Community Meals event one Friday evening each month I want to be sure to be with them. When others head off to Operation Nightwatch for another evening of providing a meal for the homeless I want to be with them, too.

My interest in being part of both events is very self serving. I don’t want to miss Jesus when he comes for a meal – hidden only so slightly in the guise of the poorest of the poor.

I know that Jesus will giggle or cry and shout in the loudest voice, “Here I am. You found me. Rejoice and be glad. Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” It is only for me to see. I can hardly wait.

Of course seeing – like piano playing – takes practice. I tried to learn to play the piano without practicing. In my case it didn’t work. I am trying harder with seeing. I practice seeing Jesus in the Eucharist. You can, too.

Henri Nouwen, a marvelous priest and a great writer, speaks about practicing to see. “I remember Mother Theresa saying to me that you can’t see Jesus in the poor unless you can see him in the Eucharist. . . . When your heart is touched by the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, then you will receive eyes capable of recognizing Jesus’ presence in the hearts of others.” My Sister, My Brother – Life Together in Christ, p. 27

Practice seeing when you come to the Table. See in the Bread the Body of Christ broken for you in your brokenness, and broken for all the other fractured people in the earth. See in the Wine the Blood of Christ poured out for you and all people. Jesus' own blood mingling with people who are bleeding from "owies" or accidents or surgeries or senseless violence or the curse of war.

Practice seeing at the Eucharist. And if "practice does make perfect" you will see Jesus in the faces of the poor, the needy, the hurt, the hopeless, those who often show up as the least likely to be Jesus, but the most likely to be Jesus.

Some Sunday I will drag out my sermon on one of my greatest teachers. It is the only sermon I repeated in the 28 years I was at Faith, Bellingham.

Clemons was my teacher. He was a chronic alcoholic. Homeless. Filthy. Obnoxious when it suited him. Threatening on some occasions.

I saw Clemons often because he knew he would at least get a cup of coffee – maybe more. Once he was mad at me because I would not give him any money. He threatened to punch me out. In a moment that surely made Jesus ashamed I told Clemons, "If you take a swing at me I will rip your arm off and beat you with it." Sweet! Not! Thanks be to God Clemons backed off.

It was years later that I learned that in Clemons Jesus was making himself known. Remember the great poetry of Isaiah 53? "... he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised and we held him of no account." Isaiah 53: 2a-3

That is a Word we use in Lent to speak of Jesus and his suffering. What I only discovered long after Clemons was not a part of my life is that the same poetry fit Clemons to a "t". There in Clemons Jesus was playing "hide and go seek," but so out in the open I missed him. I wished Jesus had giggled more or shouted at me, "Here I am," but I only made that discovery after I practiced seeing Jesus in the broken body of Jesus and Jesus' blood poured out in the Eucharist. Better late than never, but better never late.

Be more alert than I was. It won't take that much. Practice seeing Jesus in the Eucharist, and discover the joy of seeing Jesus in the lives of those you meet – especially in the lives of the most vulnerable whose needs can be cared for as though it is Jesus you are serving. Most likely it is.

And when you see Jesus it's "ok" to be surprised, to know the greatest joy, to give Jesus a big hug, and wait for the Word that Jesus will speak, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcome me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."