

Seen and Known

Scripture Reading: John 1: 35-51

As our nation pauses to remember the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, I find myself pondering something I learned recently.

Following the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, Dr. King's leadership in the civil rights movement grew. So did the persistent courage of nonviolent protestors who shared King's vision of racial equality.

As we know all too well, Southern segregationists responded with brutality whenever people protested. But with each new instance of violence, the movement only grew stronger and more determined. As with Jesus, so with Dr. King: those who were threatened thought that if they could only kill the dreamer, they would also kill the dream.

Keenly aware that there were those who wanted Dr. King dead, his inner circle was determined to do everything they could to keep the civil rights leader out of harm's way. But King's unwavering commitment to nonviolence limited their options greatly. There could be no armed body guards, no brass knuckles in the pockets, no weapons of any kind.

In those days, African American clergymen commonly wore dark blue suits. So word quietly went that whenever Dr. King was marching in protest march, pastors were to gather around him and envelope him in a sea of navy blue.

Insider Andrew Young later explained: "Many who hated Martin thought all Negroes looked alike, so this was our way to confuse a potential sniper."

Think about that. Were I to show a bit of footage from one of Dr. King's marches right now, we would marvel at the wonderful variety of face and form represented in the crowd. But to the racists Andrew Young was referring to, that crowd would be little more than a mass of indistinguishable humanity.

Not just in appearance, mind you, but in every regard.

When hate, fear, and ignorance, even indifference, are in the mix, something can happen to the human eye and the human heart. We see wrongly, of course, but we are also inclined to see others in general, rather than in particular.

Isn't that the case with the placards we sometimes catch on the news or in print, the ones that bear such hateful, horrible slogans condemning the gay community?

Whatever the wording, those messages insist on a claim that simply does not hold true: that "those people" are but one sort, cut from the same of cloth. One gay person is the same as the next is the same as the next, so the fallacy goes.

Both examples I've just given are vivid ones. But this same thing happens in more muted tones, too. In every progressive church I know or have served, there are folks who love what the church stands for but who elect to stay on the sidelines. They come to worship infrequently and only occasionally attend classes or other offerings.

They do this not because they are uncommitted. They do this because they have family and friends who are of a different bent, people who do not hesitate to voice their belief that folks like us are all misguided—spiritually doomed, even.

Not wanting to be lumped in with the rest of us, the people I'm thinking of keep their affiliation with folks like us hidden.

With our often-divergent faith perspective, you and I know the sting of being on the receiving end of stereotypes and generalizations, of being regarded as little more as belonging to a blurred, unredeemed "them."

And yet, truth be told, we progressives are sometimes guilty of returning the favor, of speaking in sweeping generalities about those who read the Bible literally or who maintain that professing Jesus Christ is the only way to eternal salvation.

Among the many challenges of being human in the way God would have us be human is learning to see each person as distinct and blessed. Distinct and blessed.

On Tuesday, our morning bible study kept company with Psalm 139. If you don't know it much or at all, spend some time with it today! Its poetry is gorgeous as it insists on a truth that Jesus quietly shines a light on today: we are each fearfully and wonderfully made. We are each seen and known by God. We are each seen and known and loved not in general but always, always in particular, always as God's one-of-a-kind creations.

Many are the times in his ministry when Jesus shows us this beautiful side of God. Today, for instance, but other times, too.

At a well on a scorching hot day, Jesus sees that the woman who has joined him isn't just any woman, but is someone who is suffering spiritual thirst, a woman who, although she is a Samaritan, is open to the living water that comes from being seen and known by this kind-eyed, open-hearted Jewish Messiah.

Another day, when the crowds around Jesus send Zacchaeus the tax collector scrambling up into a nearby sycamore so that he might hear Jesus better, Jesus looks up, calls Zacchaeus by name, and sees in this wealthy outcast a most interesting and worthy dinner companion.

Even though our gospel writers sometimes have Jesus referring to the Pharisees and scribes in generalities, I suspect this is more their spin than Jesus' true attitude.

In his after-dark encounter with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, for instance, Jesus clearly recognizes the man's earnest desire to understand, even if this member of the religious elite does prove to be a challenging student in the end.

This quality Jesus possessed for clear seeing and sensitive knowing was there from the very beginning, John's gospel wants us to know. Perhaps it was a gift that came when the Spirit alighted on Jesus at baptism. Maybe it was there from a young age, and simply grew as Jesus grew into manhood. But certainly it's a gift Jesus needs as he gathers disciples as he begins his public ministry.

There's something both wonderful and amazing at work in our story today, as Andrew, who has just become a follower of Jesus, now returns to Jesus with his brother Simon in tow. Even before Simon has a chance to stick out his hand and sputter "hello," Jesus looks him in the eye and says "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas." Peter, in Greek.

The next day, John's gospel tells us, Jesus goes to Galilee. There he encounters Philip and finds in him a man

destined to be a follower. Philip accepts, and then does what Andrew did. He goes and tells someone. Not a brother this time, but a friend, Nathanael.

You've got to love what happens next. "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth," Philip blurts out to Nathanael, hardly containing his joy.

And what does Nathanael do? He does the very thing I've been talking about—he succumbs to the human habit of seeing in general, rather than particular.

"Nazareth? Nazareth? Can anything (or anyone) good come out of Nazareth?" (Or Nucla, or Bakersfield, or the Ozarks.)

Jesus doesn't let this remark hurt his feelings or get in the way, though. Why? Because he already knows this Nathanael guy, even if Nathanael doesn't know it yet. "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you," Jesus says in what might rightly qualify as a swoon-worthy remark.

Jesus saw in particular. This particular guy under that particular tree. That's how Jesus was, just like his Father.

God sees us, not all bunched up in a crowd, not nameless, not faceless, but as we each are. We are, each of us, unique creations, seen and known and loved by God even before we had names or faces or were held in someone's arms.

Every so often, we have an experience with another person that gives us an inkling of what it was like to be seen by Jesus the first time. Maybe you had this happen when you first traded glances with the person you are now married to. Or maybe it happened with someone who's now a treasured friend or beloved mentor.

Every once in a while, we look into the eyes of someone we don't yet know, and there is a kind of recognition, a kind of knowing that goes deep. We may know absolutely nothing about this person, have no history together yet, and yet somehow we know this person and they somehow know us.

We can't will this to happen. Nor does it occur as often as it surely did with Jesus. But we can be open to it. We can promise ourselves to look at others in particular, rather than in general. Those we don't know, those we know a little, even those we already know but perhaps don't always see so clearly.

The Zulu people of South Africa have an edge on us, I suspect. When they greet one another, when they say hello, the exchange typically goes like this: "I see you," one will say, to which the other will reply "I am here."

In a sense, I don't exist until you see me. And you don't truly come to life until you are seen by me.

Don't you think that's why Jesus had people following him everywhere, crowding around him all the time? Because we each crave being seen. Being known. Being brought to life by the warm acceptance of another.

The Zulu say: A person is a person because of other people. You and I, with Jesus' help, are those people.

Amen.