

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-12

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

March 18, 2018
Fifth Sunday in Lent

I want you to think back on the very first images you remember seeing of Jesus. The first image I remember is that of the resurrected Christ knocking on a wooden door of someone's home. It hung in my grandmother's living room above her bookcase. It was an old reproduction that everyone's grandmother seemed to have. Maybe you know the kind I am talking about. Jesus is backlit. His face is gentle. His clothes pristine. He looks rather bored...at least as I remember him.

And of course, our church had a painting of Jesus – the headshot. It too was backlit for divine emphasis. His hair was blond and perfectly combed. He was calm in this picture, as well. He looked off to the side, not at me, as though he had other things on his mind, places to go and people to see.

So those were my two early images as a kid. A bored Jesus and an otherwise occupied Jesus.

It wasn't until I went to college and majored in Art History that I first saw images of Jesus that made an impact on me. Growing up in a small southern Baptist church, we didn't have many images of Christ except for the cleaned up versions from Sunday school text books. Our church didn't have a crucifix in sight. In fact, it would have been against our theology because crosses were always shown empty – a reminder that Christ had risen and thus had defeated the cross. I remember long discussions with my church going friends about the problem of depicting the crucifixion (at least from our southern protestant point of view) – that we shouldn't focus on Christ's pain and suffering...only on the joy of his resurrection.

But I wanted to see Jesus. Not the cleaned up, bored, and otherwise occupied Jesus. Not the Jesus up in heaven somewhere. I wanted to see a Jesus that I could connect with, that had experienced something of this human life – a Jesus that knew me and a Jesus that I could know.

I remember the first time that happened. I was interning at an art museum the summer after my sophomore year and there was an exhibition of Spanish colonial art and the Spanish had a particular love of painting their wooden sculptures to make them look more realistic. They wanted them to be realistic because Roman Catholic missionaries would use them to spread Christianity into the Americas. Their task was to help people feel connected to this new faith, to see that they belonged. To see something of themselves in this Christ.

And as I walking through the exhibit I turned the corner into a small gallery and saw this one sculpture that literally brought me to tears. It was one of the painted wood carvings. Jesus was sitting on a throne, his body still bloody from the crucifixion, his face worn but determined, weary yet convicted, full love and compassion. As I stood in the front of the sculpture I looked

up to Jesus and noticed that he was looking down at me. Seeing him right there, in this small gallery with no one else around, made me realize that for the first time I felt I saw Jesus. All I wanted to do in that moment was stay in this room. I couldn't walk away – it was as though I could almost have a conversation with him. This determined, convicted, compassionate and loving Jesus. I needed that experience of closeness more than I realized. I needed to see Jesus and on that day, I did.

It also made me realize that we have always been trying to find ways to see Jesus – just as the Greeks were doing in our Gospel reading. They came to Philip and said “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” It was a simple request. Surely they had heard about this man and his teachings. Surely they had heard about the work he was doing in and around Galilee and on this particular day, these individuals wanted to meet Jesus for themselves. And, my guess is that they wanted Jesus to know them, too. They wanted something more than second hand accounts of this person they had been hearing about. They wanted time together, to be closer to one another. We wish to see Jesus.

In our weekly Lenten study, one member of our group, asked – how do I get to really know Jesus? Like the Greeks, she wasn't interested in learning about Jesus theoretically or through second hand accounts. She was talking about growing closer to Jesus herself, developing a deeper relationship, a friendship, a special bond. She wanted to see and to be seen.

However, there's something tricky about all of this seeing. Because, we all know what happens when we get close to someone. They tend to find out all of our dirty laundry. It's a double edged sword. You don't get the relationship without the work. So, the text begs the question, what if Jesus turns to us and looks at us. What then? What if we are seen? We might find ourselves wondering...did I really ask for that?

We typically like to put our best foot forward when we meet someone. We put on our best outfit, fix our hair, come up with a few pre-determined wise and witty conversation points. We create an image that we want the world to see. The image of the good person, the moral person, the one who makes ethical, compassionate, just decisions that create a better world.

And so, when we ask Jesus to see us, we are opening up a can of worms. Because being seen means letting all of ourselves be available to Christ. Not just the good parts or the polished parts but the parts that hurt, the parts that don't measure up, the parts that have failed because Jesus isn't interested in a filtered version of our selves. Our faith tells us that Jesus wants all of us – that is if we are willing. Broken and flawed. Weak and struggling. Jesus wants to see what we want no one else to see. That's the power of getting to know him. We have to trust that what he sees, he will love.

Our Psalm today teaches us what this means. Verse 1 in chapter 51 says, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love.” What's beautiful about this verse is that the term for steadfast in Hebrew is “cheched” which translates as a deep relationship. It implies God's unbreakable bond with God's creation. In the context of the Psalm, cheched is reflecting the

promise that God made to Israel to mutually care for one another, even in the depth of Israel's sin, even in the depth of Israel's wrong-doing, God is saying I am here for you even in the midst of your brokenness. I am here for you because I promised you I would be. I see you.

That's the promise of Lent. It calls us to this steadfast love. This deep relationship of seeing and being seen.

So after I experienced that painted wooden carving of Christ, I started to really notice images of Jesus on the cross. I started to notice where he was looking and what his expression was like. Over time I noticed something amazing. He is looking everywhere! Some images he is looking down, others he is looking up, some to the side. I have thought over the years after spending time with countless images of Christ, that Jesus isn't going to miss much.

But there is one image in particular that has caught my attention more than all of the others.

It's a huge wood crucifix that hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It's from the 13th century, Northern Italy and the curators at the Met did something fascinating with it. They hung it next to a staircase. So, as an observer, you are able to start standing on the floor to look up, to see Jesus hanging just out of reach. You can't tell much about his expression from that far away and you can't tell where he is looking. But then you begin to ascend the stairs. You gradually get closer, level with his feet, then level with his outstretched hands. As you climb step by step you begin to see more of Jesus. And then you are directly in line with his face. And once you are eye to eye you notice something remarkable, his eyes are wide open looking directly at each person who passes by. Everyone is seen, no one is overlooked.

But, it took climbing those stairs for us to get there, to see clearly.

It reminds me that when we say, Sir, we want to see Jesus...that we have to then be willing to take the time to get to know Jesus. And once you see him and get to know him, you realize that he was looking at you the entire time. You realize that you were already known.

Thanks be to God. Amen.