

## SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

What do you see?

As we hear this so familiar parable, as we hear the questions going back and forth between a legal expert and a relatively unknown rabbi...one we know to be the Christ but who appears to be simply a gifted teacher, what do you see?

What does the legal expert see? What does Jesus see? What does this object-lesson assault victim and his rescuer see?

In 2014, while I was deployed to Africa with the Navy, I had the opportunity to go to Italy for training. And since the Navy was paying to send me to Italy, my wife and I decided it would be fun to meet in Rome for the weekend. It made us feel very fancy.

As part of our whirlwind tour of the Eternal City, we toured St. Peter's Basilica and the Vatican...as you do. And we had grown a little weary of seeing exhibit after exhibit celebrating the long history of the Roman Catholic church. We were getting a bit "peopled out" – Laurel especially.

We came to this room where signs at the entrance told visitors to be quiet. We walked through the open doorway and the room was packed with people. It was probably about the size of this sanctuary, and it was nearly wall to wall people...with some clearly visible security guards keeping a watchful eye around the edges.

Laurel wasn't interested in being hemmed in by the crush of bodies, so she made a beeline for the exit on the other end. She wasn't rude, she just purposefully walked her way between all the people milling about with her eyes focused on the exit. I was *not* rushing but quickly realized she was on a mission, and I couldn't call to her to get her attention, lest I draw the ire of those security guards.

I worked my way to the middle of the room, or so, keeping an eye on her until she finally turned around to look for me. Seeing me so far away and dawdling through this mass of people she gave me quite the exasperated – and more than a little annoyed – look. To which I responded with a hushed but distinct, "Laurel" and pointed up. Her look of annoyance quickly changed to understanding...

In her rush to get out of the crowd, she had managed to walk very quickly and purposefully under and right past the rather famous Michelangelo-painted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

It's now one of our all-time favorite stories, but it's completely understandable why

she almost didn't see what she was looking for.

Lest you think I'm going to pick on her and leave my own reputation intact, I'll share another story. When the kids were about 2 and 4, we were visiting historic Harpers' Ferry, WV with family. We lived just a few minutes away so it was a frequent destination for us. My mom and stepfather were visiting and we were walking up the hill from the museum area to explore a shop – or maybe to get ice cream.

We're walking up the sidewalk as a group and I remember that Cole was holding somebody's hand and all of a sudden, I had this moment of panic because I couldn't see Syd. "Where's Sydney?!?!?" I asked the group anxiously. They all looked at me and laughed because she was on my shoulders.

I was so focused on the wrong thing that I gave my family one of the all-time dumbest dad moments.

What do you see?

The lawyer comes to Jesus to test him. Maybe he was trying to challenge him to get him in trouble; maybe he was simply trying to understand this Jewish teacher...we don't know. But he asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. It seems like a reasonable question, given the lived experience of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish community. Their faith journey was evolving under the reign of the Romans and perhaps he just wanted to make sure he understood what God wanted from him to remain in the covenantal relationship on which they depended.

"What have you seen/read?" Jesus asks him in response to the test. "...love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." There it is, Jesus says. Do that.

But the lawyer doesn't see how that works. He doesn't understand how to do it. Or he doesn't want to do it. He isn't done trying to figure it out. "And who is my neighbor?" he asks next. The answer to that question, the only answer Jesus really gives in this entire exchange is the beloved story we've heard and repeated for generations.

And because we know it so well, because we've heard it so many times, because it has worked its way into the lexicon of culture with hospital names and legal protections, we might miss exactly what Jesus was getting at. Or we might miss the depth of this story. We might not be focusing on the right thing. Because the admonition at the end to "Go and do likewise" isn't just a watered-down reminder that we're supposed to be merciful to

those who are in need – to be charitable and kind to those who are less fortunate. It’s not a platitude about simply being “good.”

The power in this parable is in recognizing that the answer to the lawyer’s question is to see *what Jesus sees*.

Look at this parable through the lens of who sees what: the priest sees a stranger in mortal peril but **doesn’t** see someone worthy of his attention, perhaps worried about the loss of ritual purity that would come if he acted. The Levite sees a victim near death and **doesn’t** let himself be moved from whatever he believes is most important. The Samaritan sees a **person** in trouble. The Samaritan sees what is most important. The Samaritan sees the opportunity to live God’s commandment to love, and he acts.

The focus of the parable, as is so often the case, is perhaps not on the hero – the one who gets the title. The focus of this parable is the one who needs to be seen, the man lying in a ditch bleeding to death. He is in desperate need of mercy. He desperately needs to be **seen** by those who encounter him.

He isn’t seen by the first to pass by because they are too distracted by other priorities or simply unwilling to give of themselves. They **notice** him, but they don’t **see** him. They don’t find their way to mercy. They don’t see the truth of eternal life, the truth of what it means to be a neighbor.

My daughter and I were walking to dinner on Thursday evening in downtown Indianapolis. We were walking in the Mass Ave cultural district – this section of Massachusetts Avenue with trendy restaurants and a lot of nightlife. And right in the middle of this lively area, at the back of a Methodist Church parking lot is a bench with a bronze sculpture of a person sleeping under a blanket – the image of a homeless person struggling to survive the elements. The figure’s bare feet are exposed from the bottom of the blanket with very clear marks of crucifixion in them. This sculpture entitled “Homeless Jesus” has been placed in a variety of settings in the hope that people will be seen for who they are and what they are experiencing. “Homeless Jesus” is where God is seen in the world.

It wasn’t lost on me that less than 20 feet away from this sculpture of “Homeless Jesus” was a person sleeping on the grass. How many people saw him?

The answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” is to open our eyes and see the people around us. To see what God sees in the least, the lost, and the little of this world. That’s the way to eternal life. That’s the love of God. What do you see? Amen.