

Sermon 9-5-21

Paul Purdue preaching

Seeing People: Avoiding Misdirected Anger

Last summer, I found myself in a fast-food drive through line 5 minutes before opening. Lacking coffee, I struggled to navigate the orange cones and contradictory signage. The car behind me honked. Fast is in the name, fast-food, and deep in our expectations. At five minutes after 6, a yellow vested teenager started moving the traffic cones. Without an apology, he told me I was in the wrong line and could circle the building and go to the end of the line. My questions met a shrug. The prospect of texting four people for new orders led me to circle around the restaurant. While passing out the pretty-good biscuits and very average lattes, I grumbled about my harrowing breakfast ordeal, venting some angry air. My youngest interrupted my rant with a deep socketed eye roll, "Give them a break, Dad. It's the 4th of July, and they have to work." Initially perturbed at the interruption, I thought what if Caleb was working the headset on our nation's birthday for \$7.25 an hour. My anger cooled..

"Working a headset is more stressful than you think," Caleb shared, sipping his latte; "you have to do about five tasks at once, and the customers are often both distracted and impatient. One, you take orders through that scratchy speaker... *'um we would like...um, Bobby, what do you want... um do you want a sausage egg biscuit. ...um give us two number threes, no, one of those um, a bacon, egg and cheese, um no um a sausage egg and no cheese, make that two of those, are you serving French fries, can I get fries ... um no, make them, okay two chicken and egg biscuits. um one without an egg, and a gluten free number 4... how about cafe carmeletta, hot chocolate, pumpkin spice macchiato with low fat oat milk...* Two, while deciphering car A's orders over the headset, you simultaneously punch data into a touch screen. Three, you take the money from car C that just pulled up. Four, you make drinks for B's upcoming order. Five, hand the food to car C! Six, run special order D to the parking lot! Seven, deal with app ordering. Eight, tune out the "crowd noise" of beeping alarms and flashing lights designed to track your efficiency. Nine, do all this for \$7.25 an hour." An air-traffic controller lands one plane at a time while guided by a highly trained team of pilots with a precise agreed upon ordering system. My compassionate and direct son told us how he worked fast food with several parents working second jobs to stay afloat. That day, July 4 2020, I made a vow to see people in every too long line. Sometimes I succeed.

While enduring a 57 minute line for a rental car in Oakland, California, perhaps my centering breath prayer allowed me to entertain a 30 minute conversation with two graphic designers who grew up in China. They directed us to the best meal we ate on vacation. A week later, I stood in a "too long" line checking into the hotel. One especially demanding customer held us all up. See people. Practice empathy. I turned one of my involuntary angry huffs into a breath prayer, "Lord- help me see people." What if that 30 something clerk was a single mom working her second job while someone else tucked her children into bed? When the weary clerk mollified the challenging customer, they

smiled and said, "Thank you for standing there waiting so patiently." Frankly, her "thank you" caught me off guard. See people. Jesus saw people. Christians see people. Love your neighbors. Love workers. See the vulnerable. See injustice. See people. Lift burdens.

Why do we grow annoyed with slow service or a worker shortage? Is it not the "market correction" to a lack of workers' increased wages? Would we deny people a living wage so we can enjoy inexpensive biscuits? How do you pay for childcare at \$9.25 an hour? What is the societal cost of the dollar I saved on reciprocating saw blades from Amazon? What is the climate cost of shipping my new saw blades over 8,000 miles? Is it oppressive to pay Jeff Bezos billions and pay the workers less than life-improving wages? Are market values always Christian values?

Some people think such questions do not belong in sermons. James disagrees, "*My dear siblings! Hasn't God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn't God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom God has promised? But you have dishonored the poor. Don't the wealthy make life difficult for you? Aren't they the ones who drag you into court? You do well when you really fulfill the Bible's royal law, love your neighbor as yourself. But when you show favoritism, you are sinning! Siblings, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing with it? Can claiming to have faith save anyone? Imagine two people come to your meeting, one rich and the other poor. Do you offer VIP treatment to the rich, but offer second rate hospitality to the poor person? Such favoritism is sinful, judgmental, and evil-minded! What if someone endures food insecurity? Thoughts and prayers do nothing if you don't meet a person's nutritional needs! Faith is dead when it doesn't produce faithful activity.*"

James adds, "My siblings, when you show favoritism (prejudice, partiality), you deny the faith. When you show favoritism (privilege, racism, or sexism), you are committing a sin." Perhaps, racism makes us apostates because racism fails to see people and Jesus always sees people. When we do not see people, are we failing to see Jesus? We ought to see others. Our unexplored anger can keep us from seeing people. We see categories instead of people: masked or unmasked, red or blue, white or black, rich or poor, well educated or ignorant, Ivy league or state college, socialist or capitalist, pro-business or pro-worker, pro-choice or pro-life, science or faith, pro-America or traitor, urban or rural, traditional or contemporary, progressive or evangelical. Now, behavior matters; the unmasked present some dangers, and I will stand a little further away from them. However, human life is more complex than our easily applied labels and assumptions. Labels keep us from seeing people and finding solutions or common ground. Do labels give us permission to no longer care? Can I stop caring if I see some is an 'illegal' or an 'anti-vaxer'? Jesus saw through our labels. Jesus saw people. I am not especially 'pro-corporations', but I know many christlike business owners who love to create jobs, already pay more than market rates, and would love to do more, but market forces make this almost impossible, without systemic change like universal healthcare, mandated living wages, or even global climate policies. I am a former fundamentalist evangelical, but my core relationship with Jesus has barely changed as I

became wildly more progressive. Theological labels may be the most divisive. Seeing people transforms us. Jesus always saw people. Seeing people transforms our thinking and anger.

The Incarnation is about God seeing people. God so deeply identifies with us that God came into the world to see humanity through human eyes. God sees us through Jesus. God sees us when there is no room in the inn. God sees us as the Holy Family becomes refugees to Egypt. God sees us in the full ICUs queued up for healing. God's children see the richness of the poorest widow's contribution. Jesus saw Zacchaeus, and God sees every other millionaire's sacred worth. God sees us and weeps over unjust capitals. God sees us while flipping over temple exchange tables. God sees us dining with those labeled sinners. God sees us in Peter's denial. God sees us in Judas' kiss. God sees us in Pilate's cowardice and Jesus' unjust trial. God sees the blows of the police, the crowd's mocking, and clergy's glee at killing a heretic. God sees us telling the crucified mother his beloved friend will care for Mary. God sees us in Magdalene's joyful tears and Peter's stunned unbelief. Love deeply sees people. God sees us. Christians see people.

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Last week we talked about how Jesus grew angry at injustice and how unaddressed or sublimated anger is a poison to the soul. With a global pandemic, climate change, a withdrawal from a twenty year war, and ICUs filled with unvaccinated people, there is a lot to get mad about- fight, flee, or freeze moments surround us. In these difficult days, we need to look up and look around. What will we see, the long line, the inflaming posts,

their ignorant choices, or the first label we can find? What will we look for? Will we see people or turn on each other? God sees people.

God loves the world. And seeing people in need, God sends Christ into the world. When Christ is in us, we see people. Faith without deeds is worthless. Seeing people transforms us. Seeing people sends us into the world. Amen.