

Homily – See God Around You

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I am one who believes God is active in our world. I have previously shared my story about following a car to church. The day before, my wife had announced she was filing for divorce. So, when I decided I needed to go to church, but had only been in California for two days, I decided to following a car that looked like it might lead me to a church. It did, and I spent the next eight years with the people of that church. That was a God thing. Again, I am one who believes God is active in our world.

Fast forward nine years, and I was having a drink with a friend when I think God led me to Jeff, my husband. The friend and I had dated, five years prior, and we had stayed friends. My friend had a moment of insight in which he said, “Why have I never introduced you to my friend, Jeff. You are both Episcopal, you are both about the same age, you are both single, and you are both my friend. Let me give you Jeff’s phone number.” Jeff and I met two days later for lunch, and two weeks from now is the seventeenth anniversary of that lunch. Again, I am one who believes God is active in our world.

The thing that these two stories have in common is that I was in a frame of mind to be open to what was happening around me. On a whim, I was willing to try something new. I was willing to engage with strangers. Two important things in my own life happened in a flash. I could not have predicted them. I could not have made them happen.

Maybe in retrospect you can look at your own life and see some of these flash turning points. {pause}

Whether it is a job, or a relationship, or even an important ministry. God has been at work in all our lives. {pause}

Again, I am one who believes that God is active in our world. But, I wonder how many chances I have missed because I am oblivious or shut down. {pause}

Today’s Gospel reading is often labeled “the road to Emmaus story.” On the same day that the women found the tomb of Jesus to be empty, two of Jesus’ disciples are walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. We know nothing about these two except that (1) one of them is named Cleopas, (2) they are not the male or female disciples with whom Jesus were closest, and (3) the death and resurrection of Jesus had left them feeling despondent and even overwhelmed.

And then, they don’t see that God has come into their lives. We are told that “Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing

him.” We don’t know why they fail to see Jesus, but two thousand years later, as we read this story we know these disciples have missed something big.

But, we also know they have set themselves up to see God by welcoming the stranger into their midst. Two thousand years ago, hospitality, even while walking along the road, was an important value. These two disciples were friendly with a stranger that starting walking with them. In fact they welcomed him, tell him important things that are going on in their lives, and invite him to stop and have a meal with them.

And, the disciples are rewarded for their hospitality to a stranger. Their eyes are opened and they see God around them. They see and experience the risen Jesus whom they thought had been taken from them. And, with bursting hearts they immediately turn around and return to Jerusalem to tell the others that God had been in their midst as a stranger.

I don’t know about you, but that is an experience that I want to have. I want my eyes opened to see our God who is already with us. Far too often, I am like the disciples in the first half of the story. I don’t see God who is already blessing me and doing good things in my life.

However, I want to be like the disciples in the second half of the story. And, if we use today’s Gospel reading as a lesson on how to open our eyes, then we see that we must be open to those serendipitous things and people that are already around us. God is in all and around all. God is in us, and God is in all those around us as well. If you wonder how much of your day is in the presence of God, then you should know the answer is all of it. All of your life is in the presence of God, in the embrace of God, in the midst of the people of God.

One of the complaints that I used to have about my dad was that he was always talking to strangers. My mother says that my brother, sister, and I used to get so frustrated with my dad when he was talking to someone again. And most of these times we just had to wait as my dad talked to someone he had never met before. As an older, wiser person, I wonder if my dad was on to something.

Here in California we have a culture in which we don’t talk to strangers. How often have you been in the grocery store, and someone started to talk to you? I have to admit that far too often I wonder what is wrong with the person, what they want from me, or how I can make them stop talking to me. I miss an opportunity to be in conversation with someone new. I miss an opportunity to see how God may already be working in the world around me. Do you miss these opportunities as well? God is surrounding you with blessings, and opportunities, and people. Is your heart open to what is already happening?

The spirituality writer, Henri Nouwen wrote about ‘hospitality of heart.’ At its core, hospitality is an opening of the heart. It really has very little to do with having

friends over for dinner. Indeed, we can invite others into our homes for a meal three nights a week, but if our hearts are not open, we have not offered hospitality. This is what makes us avoid real hospitality as a practice. We hesitate to open our hearts to the degree required by hospitality. Providing a meal or shelter seems more manageable than opening our hearts.

Opening our hearts means we really have to gather others in. Their problems, their dreams, the injustices done to them, the hopes that lie hidden in their souls, the joys that have taken them to heaven's door – all of these become a part of our own hearts when we engage in hospitality as a spiritual practice.

The challenge is that the contents of our own hearts merge with those of our guest. This means that what is in our hearts is no longer front and center. It is no longer all about me. Instead, it becomes all about us.

My prayer for us this week is that we open our hearts to God who is already working around us. You may not need to follow a car to church. You may not need to jump at the invitation to meet someone new. But, I wonder if that stranger that is standing six feet behind you in the grocery store line, I wonder if they will have God working through them in your life. Or, maybe you can be a blessing in their life.

We bless each other, and we mirror the love of God out into the world, when we open our hearts to the serendipitous. This week, may you see God at work around you.