

SEEING JESUS

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:31-46, NRSV)

On this summer's youth mission trip to Richmond, Virginia, we gathered each night to reflect upon our day's work, and I asked the youth, "In whom did you see Jesus today?" The question took its form from the scripture we read at the beginning of the week from Matthew 25, the same scripture read this morning. In it, Jesus puts forward the startling idea that our treatment of others is tantamount to our treatment of him. In a dramatic reversal of power, the Lord who judges all of the people of the world identifies himself with those of lowest status. Jesus' words, "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" and their converse, "just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" invite us to consider those we meet in a new light—we are to love them because Christ is found in them. During our week in Richmond, we all had plenty of opportunity to see Jesus in the love shown by others and in the pain others feel.

Probably the person we met who seemed most to exemplify Jesus' love came in the form of Bill Berry, the director of SynerGeo, the organization we worked with. Bill is a middle-aged guy with long graying hair, most likely to be found wearing flip-flops, cutoff jeans and a faded t-shirt. I have known Bill for years in his various roles working

for one ministry or another. We worked together on a youth mission camp back when I was in seminary. He's the type of guy to dream big dreams and raise prophetic questions while at the same time charming everyone with his easygoing manner. He's ending his career of serving as minister and missionary all over the world by working in a low-income neighborhood in downtown Richmond, Virginia.

Bill and his family moved to the neighborhood of Oregon Hill a number of years ago and his work in the community of working-class whites has slowly evolved into a ministry that is called SynerGeo. The name comes from a Greek word meaning: "'To work together with,' bringing together two or more parts to work cooperatively to create a whole greater than the sum of the parts." Like Bill and his family, college and seminary students have committed to live in the community for at least one year in order to build relationships and meet human need. They've turned an old corner store into a community center that provides art classes to neighborhood children. They deliver meals to shut-ins and even take them to doctor's appointments. They've bought houses in the community to provide a place to live for people being forced out of their homes by rising rents in the quickly gentrifying neighborhood.

I saw Jesus in Bill many times during the week. The way he brought our attention to the needs in the area seemed to echo Jesus' continued efforts to make those around him see the poor and oppressed. Often, Bill could be found on the street corner talking with passersby, whether they were young college students, aimless young men with bottles of malt liquor in their hand, old women out for a stroll or children running in the summer sun, Bill made time for all of them. With his approachable manner, Bill greeted each person no matter their station in life as if they mattered and were worthy of care.

I also saw Jesus in the people of Oregon Hill. It's a neighborhood with a unique past. Many of its residents are descended from the original settlers who came from the Appalachian Mountains in the mid 1800's to work at the Tredegar Ironworks on the James River. These settlers were the cheap labor looking for a better life who left behind family and kin to settle in what would become the capital of the Confederacy. As the city changed, the neighborhood remained isolated from other areas, partly due to geography and partly due to the contours of the city. Today, Oregon Hill is bounded on two sides by the James River, one side by a six-lane expressway, and the other side by the sprawling campus of a large corporation. In this self-contained community, you are still more likely to hear accents that sound like the secluded valleys of Appalachia than the accents of central Virginia. Like their ancestors, today's residents remain blue collar laborers who live in the homes built over one hundred years ago.

The charm of this community is under attack today by the forces of market economics and gentrification. As the city's university has grown, so has the need for cheap student housing. Enterprising landlords have raised rents to make a profit from the more affluent students. Also, rising property values have left longtime homeowners with higher property taxes that they cannot afford. Now people who have lived in this neighborhood for their entire lives are forced to leave behind the only friends and community they have ever known.

We saw Jesus in the people of Oregon Hill on our first day there, when some of our group helped a family clean out their basement as they prepared to move away. The landlord had tripled the rent, and the family could not find another affordable house to rent in the neighborhood. The father in the family had been recently laid off after a lifetime's work at the same company. His elderly mother lived with them and was chronically ill. He shared his concerns that the move might kill her, because she had lived in Oregon Hill for almost eighty years. The landlord had given a deadline for the family to remove their belongings from the house and clean out the basement, even though most of the items in the basement were left by previous tenants. The work cleaning out the basement was dusty and dirty (just ask Whitney Quackenbush about finding a bucket full of dead mice). As we pulled out the castoffs of generations of the house's renters and then hauled them off to the landfill, we received the sincere thanks of the family members who were too overwhelmed with their move to have done it themselves and too strapped for cash to pay the fees at the landfill.

We saw the dark side of urban renewal again as bulldozers knocked down trees on the edge of the neighborhood. The only green space available to the neighborhood children was being ripped out to make way for new expensive townhouses. The new construction would undoubtedly raise property values throughout the neighborhood and cause more families to move away.

Too often, we see such development as improvement and making things better, but in reality, things are only "better" for those who benefit financially from such designs. Things are made worse for people who have no political or financial capital to resist such change and share none of the profits. Those of us on the winning end of such deals will have to answer some day to Jesus. The people who we ignore and take no account of, whose lives are disrupted by the market, become important when viewed from the perspective of Christ. Is profit really profitable when our success comes at the expense of others?

I also saw Jesus in the actions of our youth and our faithful youth chaperone, Anne Sacks (who deserves far more credit than I can ever give for spending a week tirelessly working for others). You should be proud of our young people. They tarred and flashed a roof in the summer heat and humidity. They climbed ladders to scrape away old paint and replace it with new bright colors. They hauled away garbage. And they did it all (okay, almost all) without complaining.

The day I saw Jesus most vividly in our youth occurred on Thursday afternoon. The students at SynerGeo have a weekly arts program for neighborhood kids. The children of Oregon Hill go to schools that lack even the most basic programs to expose them to the wider world and their own potential creativity. On that day, we did a sight and sound scavenger hunt. Each youth paired up with a child and went through the community rubbing words and numbers with pencil and paper and listening for the sounds of nature and the city. As I saw our youth holding hands of the children, some giving piggy-back rides, branching out through the neighborhood, I was so proud to see these teenagers giving each child their full attention. I thought that Jesus must have walked with children

the same way, showing them that they were valued and loved. It was only one afternoon and those children may not end up remembering the name of their youth helper or even that they were from New York, but they will remember that they were loved and cared for by Christians.

Our youth got a glimpse of a world they do not see here in our community. They saw a neighborhood of people who are worthy of care and respect but are ignored and dispossessed. My hope for our youth is that they will remember this experience and look for Jesus in the people without power in our society. My hope for our church is that we will learn from the example of our youth and realize that our actions have consequences, our economy has losers and each person lost in the mix is someone that Jesus declares has infinite worth.

May God open our eyes so that we can see Jesus. Amen

Rev. Chase Peeples
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)
September 14, 2003
Youth Mission Sunday
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of justice, open our eyes to the needs of our world. Help us to see the images on our TV screens not as entertainment, not as someone else's problem but as real people with real pain. Open our ears to hear the cries of a world in need of hope. Help us to realize that when we turn our backs on people across the world or down the block, we have turned our backs upon Jesus. Change our value systems, so that we might understand what you find of value. Cleanse us of our endless pursuit of more things we don't need and replace it with a desire to provide others with what they desperately need. Help us to see Jesus in the face of everyone we meet. Amen.