

From Generation to Generation: We See God In Each Other

Luke 1:39-43

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When I was in second grade our teacher gave us a surprise quiz. She passed out a single sheet of paper and told us to leave it face-down on our desks. When everyone had a copy she told us to do our work quickly but carefully. Then she told us to turn our papers over and begin. When I turned my copy over I notice that there were directions at the top of the page...just a single sentence. But what really caught my eye was the first question, a simple math problem which I quickly solved. And once I got started I continued answering the questions until I came to the last item on the page. It said, "Do not answer any question on this quiz. Simply turn your blank sheet in to your teacher. Or perhaps you didn't read the directions?" Confused, I went back to the top of the page and read the directions...for the first time. The single sentence said, "Read this entire quiz first before answering any of the questions." As I recall only three students in that class actually passed that quiz and they were all girls, proving that men really don't read directions!

In these contentious and divisive times, I can't help but wonder if we haven't done something similar with the Scriptures. That is to say, I wonder if we haven't too-quickly skipped an essential direction at the very beginning of the story that could save us a lot of headache and heartache. It's found in Genesis 1, in the first story of creation where it says, "So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." How different would our world be if, when we looked at one another we saw, not how different we are, but how we all bear the image of God? How different would our world be if we embraced one another, not because we voted the same way, but because we believe that God imbued every human being with infinite worth? How different would our world be if we honored one another, not based on the work that we do but because we see God at work in one another, birthing something wonderful?

In today's Scripture reading we encounter two people who didn't skip that direction – Mary and Elizabeth. Let's hear just a bit of their story from Luke 1: 39-43:

A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and

exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?"

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Shortly after Mary heard from the angel Gabriel that she would bear the Son of God, she left her home in Nazareth and traveled to her cousin, Elizabeth, in the hill country of Judea...a journey of about 90 miles. Without email or even snail mail we can assume that Mary arrived at Elizabeth's home unannounced. But Elizabeth, who was also with child, didn't just welcome Mary in; she was filled with the Holy Spirit and blessed Mary while the child in her womb leapt and kicked with joy. Elizabeth saw God at work in her cousin. She named it, celebrated it and blessed it. And Mary did the same for Elizabeth. As they beheld one another they didn't just see a cousin; they saw God and God at work.

This past summer I had the privilege of traveling to Ireland and along the way we got to tour the Waterford Crystal Factory. We watched in awe as these remarkable craftsmen and women hand cut crystal into some of the most beautiful objects you can imagine. And we learned that each piece bears this little Waterford stamp as a reminder of the care and skill that goes into the making of it...and explains why the stuff is so freakishly expensive! As I walked through their showroom, I had a whole new appreciation for each and every goblet, vase, decanter and trophy. Now, whenever I see fine glassware, I look for that little Waterford stamp, and when I see it I think to myself, "I know where you come from. I know what you're worth."

Today's Scripture reading invites us, challenges us, to walk through the showroom of this world and know that every person bears a mark that can only be seen with eyes of faith. It's a mark that says, "Handcrafted with loving care. Made in the image of God and of infinite worth." And we're invited and challenged to see how each unique person has been handcrafted for a purpose, a unique vessel in whom and through whom God is at work in the world. I want to live with eyes that see all people that way. And I long to be seen that way as well. To be seen, embraced, welcomed and appreciated as one who bears the image of God despite my flaws and failures.

On May 9, 1969 an episode of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood aired and featured Officer Clemens, a black police officer. It was a hot day and Mr. Rogers was cooling his feet in a little plastic kiddie pool. Mr. Rogers invited Officer Clemens to have a seat, take off his shoes and socks and cool off in the pool with him and together they had a conversation about how nice it is to put your hot feet in cool water on a warm day. I distinctly remember seeing that episode as a child, but I had no idea what Mr. Rogers

was doing in that moment. I had no idea that just 10 years before that episode aired 19-year-old David Isom dared to swim in a “white-only” swimming pool in Florida. The manager promptly closed the pool, drained it and sterilized it so that it could be open the next day. That manager did not see the image of God in David Isom. He did not see God at work in him. He did not see his infinite worth.

Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister by training, was proclaiming the Gospel to a world that needed to hear it. Without saying a word, he was challenging children and their parents to look deeper, to look with eyes of faith and see the image of God in Officer Clemens, to see God at work in him and by extension in every human being. It was preaching at its best.

In just a few days we’re going to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. And I dare to believe that God chose an ordinary peasant girl to bear God’s son as a way of daring us to believe that we all bear the divine. We all bear the image. The question is, will we have eyes to see it? Hearts to welcome it? Arms to embrace it? Oh, how different our world would be.

Is there someone in your life that you see, but not really? Not fully? Someone about whom you’ve forgotten that one important instruction, that stamp that says “Handcrafted with loving care. Made in the image of God and of infinite worth”? Can you bring that person to mind right now?

Now, let me challenge you to open your eyes and ask your faith to see more. To see God in that person. To see what God is birthing in and through them. To see their infinite worth. And then, how about inviting them into the kiddie pool of your life. Sit together. Cool off from all the contentiousness, bitterness and divisiveness and talk together about how good it is to be, to be human to be made in the image of God. And see if the Spirit within you doesn’t leap and kick with joy.