

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“Seeing People for Who They Really Are”**

**Luke 15:1 – 3, 11b – 32  
2 Corinthians 5:16 – 21**

**September 25, 2016**

Back in my pre-married days, many moons ago, when Sylvia and I were courting... I think I did a pretty good job of letting Sylvia see me for who I really was. For example, one night she wanted me to take her out to dinner; but I told her that I couldn't because I was keeping score for one of the local bowling leagues. Hey, don't laugh... they were paying five bucks a game! You don't just walk away from that kind of dough!

Another time, Sylvia took a ten-day trip to Hawaii with one of her high school girlfriends; and, when she got back home, she again wanted me to take her out to dinner somewhere. *“But, honey,”* I said, *“the Angels are playing tonight! I told the guys I'd go to the game with them!”* *“But, Rick,”* she said, *“don't you want to see me? And didn't you go to the Angels game last night?”* I said, *“Yeah, I went to the game last night. And, of course I want to see you. But, honey, Frank Tanana's on the mound tonight! I gotta go!”*

And then there was the day that we took a drive down to Newport Beach, and I decided to blast some Led Zeppelin tunes on my super-loud car stereo. Sylvia's always been more of a Neil Diamond/Michael Buble type... but this was **Zeppelin**, man! So, we're driving along, and I'm like, **“ISN'T THIS AWESOME? I LOVE THIS SONG!”** I couldn't hear her answer... but I'm pretty sure she said she liked it.

Finally, there was that romantic evening, walking arm in arm along the beach, enjoying the beautiful sunset. And Sylvia turned to me, looked up into my eyes, and asked, *“Babe (hey, it was the '70's, so we all said “babe,” alright?)... Babe, who's your best friend?”* And I looked at her, and said... *“Wow, that's a tough one. Probably, Glenn? Or maybe Steve? Or Kent! Yeah, it's gotta be Kent!”* Which, uh, was the wrong answer... as I learned during our stone-silent drive home.

Anyway, like I said, I really did do a great job of letting Sylvia see me for who I really was, at that time: a complete, total, numbskull idiot! And she still married me! I love this country! And I'm a lot different from that now!

But, seriously, we don't always do such a good job of letting other people see us for who and what we really are. And sometimes that's not such a bad thing... I mean, we don't necessarily want everyone to know every last thing about us, right? I mean, some things are just nobody else's business but ours.

And, at the same time, we often fail pretty miserably at seeing others for who they really are. It's so easy for our perception of others to become seriously skewed by prejudice, or a lack of empathy or understanding, or something that's happened to us in our own past, or any of a dozen other reasons. For example, sometimes people completely misread us, simply on the basis of where we're from. When Sylvia and I first moved to New Jersey so I could attend seminary, and when I told people that we were from Southern California... they made all kinds of assumptions about us, some accurate, but many ridiculous. I mean, I had some friends in Princeton who assumed that, since I was from California, I must be a crazy driver. **This** from a guy who drives every day in **Jersey**... the world capital of crazy driving!

I was supposed to be a fruit-and-vegetable lover... which, at the time, I certainly was not. I was supposed to have been a surfer in my high school days... but I've never been on a surfboard in my life. I was supposed to be always laid back and relaxed... but most of my waking hours I'm a nervous wreck. I was supposed to be a Dodger fan... but I hated the stinkin' Dodgers, and I still do! And on and on it went.

And we struggle sometimes to see past the color of a person's skin, or the size of a person's bank account, or the stereotype of a person's religious affiliation, or the caricature of a person's political party, or the way a person looks, or talks, or dresses.

I've probably told you before that Sylvia and I met on a blind date. Before that date, I'd never met Sylvia, I'd never seen her, I really didn't know very much about her. And, when I asked the friend who'd set up the date, "Hey, what's she like?" he told me that she's... Spanish. "Oh, she's a Spanish girl." And I'm like, "*Spanish? You mean, she's from, what, Barcelona? What's she doing in California?*" And he said, "*No, she's not **Spanish**, Spanish... she's **his-panic**; you know... like Spanish-ish, her family **speaks** Spanish.*"

And he hemmed, and hawed, and beat around the bush... until he finally broke down and told me that Sylvia is Mexican. Her family immigrated to California from Mexico. And he was afraid that, if I knew that... I might not want to go out on this blind date. Such was the prejudicial atmosphere that we breathed, in the Orange County, California of those days. And if I'd reacted in the way that he'd feared... what a tragedy it would've been for **my** life; as I would have missed out on knowing, and loving, and marrying the kindest, wisest, most gracious and generous and humble-spirited, Christian disciple I've ever known.

We live our lives amid so much of that kind of distraction, and distortion, and misunderstanding, that it can take a great deal of effort and self-discipline in order to truly see someone else for who, and what, they really are. And in our lesson this morning from Second Corinthians, Paul the Apostle gives us a great piece of counsel... for taking a big step in that very important direction.

In our text, Paul is in the midst of a long self-defense of his apostolic credentials, and the legitimacy of his ministry among the Corinthians. As we know from both First and Second Corinthians, Paul was being criticized and belittled by his opponents in Corinth, for a whole big laundry list of perceived faults:

He wasn't a very good preacher, they said. He was physically uninspiring and dumpy-looking, they complained. He was an eloquent writer, but a monotonous speaker; he had some kind of physical disability (Paul himself referred to it as his "thorn in the flesh") that distracted people from hearing his message; he had the wrong kind of spiritual gifts; he used to be a church-hater and persecutor of Christians; and, last but not least, he was a Johnny-come-lately to the apostolic ranks, and not one of the original twelve disciples.

Apparently there were plenty of people in Corinth who looked at Paul... and saw someone they didn't like. Someone they didn't respect. Someone who wasn't enough like they were. Someone who just wasn't enough of a big-shot to have really come from God. They saw all these things about Paul that turned them off... which made it virtually impossible for them to see Paul for who he really was. To see him for **what** he truly was: the specially chosen representative of Almighty God Himself, to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the gentiles, to the non-Jews.

In other words, Paul had been hand-picked by God to bring the message of grace, forgiveness, and salvation to people just like the Corinthians. But all the Corinthians could see was a strange-looking little guy, who talked funny, and said things that were very challenging... and which made them very uncomfortable. And because of **that**, they were on the verge of missing out on the best gift that God could ever give them.

And what we see in the portion of the letter that we read today, was part of Paul's answer to the criticisms which were being leveled against him. And, in essence, Paul's answer was this: Because of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we have become a **new** creation, something different than we were before... something better, something sacred, something of eternal significance. The old, weak, sinful, corrupted Paul has passed away; the new, strong, forgiven, and heaven-blessed Paul has come.

It is now as if Jesus Himself were living in me, Paul says... and because of that, when you see me, it's as if you were seeing Him, too. And Paul uses Jesus Himself as an example: "*We once regarded Christ from a 'human' point of view; we once considered Him to be just another man, who was arrested, beaten, treated with disrespect, and eventually executed. We thought that He was just another rabbi gone bad... overwhelmed by His own sense of self-aggrandizement.*

*"But after His resurrection, all of that changed; our whole perspective was turned upside down... and we saw Jesus for who He really is: the Son of God, and the One who gives us true life, and total forgiveness."*

Paul was saying that no longer would he see Jesus from a merely human, or worldly, point of view. And, as he tells the Corinthians, he will regard **no one**, nobody, from a worldly point of view. Because, as he says, "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*" And, we see this idea repeated often in Paul's letters... as he reminds his readers that, because of the grace and love of Christ, there is now no longer Jew or gentile, slave or free person, male or female... and why? Because we

are all **one** in the Lord. We all have equal worth in God's eyes... equal value, equal standing, equal access to God's love.

To a culture, then as now, insistent on seeing people primarily in terms of rich or poor, black or white, brown or red, important or unimportant, desirable or undesirable, right or wrong, good or bad, and on, and on, and on... Paul says, "Try seeing people primarily as beloved children of God, for whom Jesus Christ died."

Try seeing people as Jesus sees them... not as members of some pigeon-holed category, but as **people**; who are, at the level of the soul, just like I am. Try valuing people as Jesus values them... not giving bonus points for looking like me, or thinking like me, or agreeing with me, or living like me; but remembering that Jesus went to the cross as much for the anonymous Roman soldiers who killed Him, as He did for the well-known disciples who followed Him and loved Him. To Jesus, everybody counts... everybody matters. Even me... with all my sins, mistakes, and screw ups. Try caring for people as Jesus cares for them... simply because they're in need of care; not because they've proven to me that they deserve my care, or have earned my care, or have promised not to take my care for granted.

Try loving people as Jesus loves them... just because. Unconditionally. Agape-style... which means that you deserve my love simply because you **are**. No matter what. Just like Jesus has loved me... and has promised to always love me. That, at the end of the day, is what Paul was saying to his friends, and foes, in Corinth. And you can be sure that it's also what Paul is saying to our polarized, divided, conflicted, and too often prejudiced world today.

To a world with an inexhaustible supply of reasons to see people as "other..." Paul says, "Try... just try... to see people, if even just a little bit, as being just like you. A beloved child of God... cared for unconditionally by the Lord Jesus Himself." Is that an easy thing to do? No! It's one of the most difficult things we'll ever attempt! But is it still worth at least trying... even if we make just a little bit of progress? You're darn right it is! Because every small step that we take in the direction seeing other people as Jesus sees them... is a small step in the direction of being more like Jesus Himself. And that's something that every last one of us is called to do, as disciples of Jesus.

As we make our way into the week ahead, let's do our best to hold on to that Christ-like view of others... and to see them for who they really are, beneath all the stuff that divides us and puts us at odds. For that is the way of true discipleship... and the way of growing in our faith.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.