

Third Sunday of Easter – Cycle A – 2017

President George Bush the 1st, shortly after his inauguration, made a goodwill tour of a nursing home....As he was walking thru the building with his staff and body guards,... he came upon an elderly man whose nurse was wheeling him down the hallway...The president bent down to talk to the man,... took his wrinkled hand in his,...looked him in the eye and said to him,... "Do you know who I am?"...Without missing a beat, the old man replied, "No, but if you ask the nurse here, maybe she can tell you."

"Do you know who I am?"...That could be the title of today's Gospel account of two disciples meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus, shortly after His resurrection...Like the old man in the nursing home, those disciples didn't recognize the one they were talking to – at least not right away. In the Gospel story, we have Cleopas and his companion telling Jesus all about what had happened in Jerusalem over the past three days, as if Jesus knew nothing about it, when He was the one who had lived through it all. ...Not recognizing who Jesus was, those sad and dejected disciples told Him how they had placed all their hopes in this Jesus....who they were counting on to rescue the Jews from Roman rule,...and how their dreams had died with Jesus on the cross, and **even** the report of the empty tomb had not lifted their heavy hearts, because no one had yet seen the Risen Lord ...

And after those two disciples had finished telling Jesus all that had happened,...He rebuked them for being so slow to believe what the prophets had foretold about how the Messiah would have to suffer before He entered into his glory...Then Jesus reminded them of all that was in the Scriptures about the Messiah,...pointing out all the signs they had missed...They listened to Him,...but they still didn't get that it was the Risen Christ who was speaking to them....Jesus must've been thinking, "Do you know who I am?"... "Do you know who I am?" That's what Jesus asks us whenever He's right there with us,...and we don't seem to recognize Him, we don't respond to His presence...Here's a true story that shows how this can happen.

Tony Campolo is a well known evangelical Christian leader, and - you can tell by his name – he's a paizan'. Not that that's important...Just sayin'...This is Tony telling about an experience that changed his life: *...I was walking down the street in Philadelphia on my way to a meeting, and a bum comes walking towards me. I mean a dirty, smelly guy with a scraggly beard that had pieces of rotted food stuck to it. As he came up to me, he held out a cup of McDonald's coffee and said, "Hey mister, want some of my coffee?"...I looked at this dirty man and tried not to cringe as I answered, "Thanks, but that's ok," ..and I walked away. A minute after I passed him, I knew I was doing the wrong thing,...so I turned and walked back to him and said, "Excuse me. I will have some of your coffee."...So I took the cup, barely sipped it, gave it back to him,...Then I said, "You're very generous. How come you're sharing your coffee?"*

The bum looked at me and said, "Because the coffee tastes especially good today, and I think that when God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people."...I didn't know how to handle that, so I said, "Can I give you anything?"... I figured he was going to hit me for five dollars...At first, he said, "No, thanks."...But then, he said, "Yeah, I changed my mind, there is something you can give me... You can give me a hug."...I was hoping for the five dollars!...He put his arms around me, and I put mine around him...The smell of alcohol, sweat and urine was so bad I had to hold my breath...And as we hugged one another on the street, I had this strange awareness that I wasn't hugging a bum. ...I was hugging Jesus...I had found Jesus in that lonely, broken man,...and I had almost walked away.

In Chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel,...Jesus described a scene – the last scene,...the Final Judgment - where everyone stands before Jesus the King...In that sermon,...Jesus left no doubt that our salvation – our eternal destiny - will depend **above all** on how we treat the hungry,...the naked,...the broken, ..the poor, ...the prisoner,...the stranger,...and we can add to that the druggie, the drunk, and the disturbed, ...the weak,...and the forgotten...Jesus said, "Whatever you do for these least of my brothers and sisters, you do for Me."..."Whatever you do NOT do for these least of my brothers and sisters, you do NOT do for Me."

It's as if Jesus was saying... "You see that raggedy man digging for cans and bottles in that dumpster? ..That's Me....You see that lonely shut-in longing for someone to talk to?...That's Me...You see that immigrant struggling to make a home in a strange, new land?...That's Me...You see who's lying in bed #17 in the homeless shelter?...That's Me...You see that single mom with her baby in line at the soup kitchen?...That's Me....You know that life growing in the womb?...That's Me."

In our Gospel, the two disciples were so heavy with grief over what had happened in Jerusalem, that they couldn't see that it was Jesus walking alongside them on the road...There will be times when we are so absorbed in what's going on in our life, ...that we will miss seeing Jesus in the needy or the suffering or the stranger walking alongside us on life's road...And - even worse - there may be times when we **do know that** it's Jesus,...but we find it too hard, or too inconvenient, too unpleasant, or asking too much, for us to reach out and minister to Him..This is when the Holy Spirit will step in to do what Jesus told us the Holy Spirit would do: remind us of everything that Jesus has said,...especially when He said:.. "The way you are treating the least of my brothers and sisters, is the way you are treating me."...That's likely what happened to Tony Campolo that day as he started to walk away from that bum...The Holy Spirit got his attention: "Tony, aren't you forgetting what Jesus said?"...

My friends, whenever we meet a needy person, a suffering person, a forgotten person... we will find that Jesus is there waiting to be loved in that person, waiting for us to answer YES when He asks, "Do you know who I am?"...When we reach out to a person in need,.. when we embrace someone who is hurting, .. when we minister to someone who is going through hard times,...we will become strangely and wonderfully aware - as Tony did - that it's Jesus coming right back at us through that person... If Tony had kept walking away from that bum,...he would've missed a hug from Jesus.

If we walk away,...we may miss a whole lot more...We may miss an eternity of hugs from Jesus

In a few minutes,...- just as it happened to those disciples at Emmaus - we will become aware of the Risen Lord's presence in the breaking of the bread. ...As we come forward to experience His true, real presence in the Eucharist,...let this be our prayer:

....Dear Jesus, I'm sorry for the times I may have ignored you or failed to see you in the faces of the needy and the suffering. Open my eyes to all the ways you make yourself present to me,... so that when you ask me, "Do you know who I am?"...I will answer, "Yes, you are Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God."...AMEN!