

“Disguised”

Matthew 25:31-46

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Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

They were doing what they usually did on the first Sunday of the month. They were feeding people. About thirty people waited outside in the beautiful cool fall afternoon, anticipating what they had come to know as the First Sunday Supper.

At that place, everyone is welcome. They don't care if you are just out of jail. They don't care if you've been married seven times. They don't even care if you have or haven't accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior (well, they care, but they won't turn you away if you haven't). No matter what has happened to you, you are welcome.

They use tablecloths and decorations and sometimes they play music and Bingo after dinner. They pray. They thank God, almost as much for the chance to serve as to be served. And they feed. Their cooks are amazing. They put together some of the best meals, meals you would be proud to serve your in-laws.

And the youth came, month after month, to set up and prepare, to serve and clean up. Perhaps not always cheerfully, but they came.

This evening the crowd was larger than usual. People streamed in. The slow and meditative sounds of Taize music filled the air. They came, the toothless and the unwashed. Some sheepish, others proud, some all alone, others with children in tow. I couldn't help but think of the Great Banquet as they slowly came in the door, waiting expectantly for what they knew would be good.

And it was a busy evening, lots of drinks to pour and spills to wipe, highchairs to fetch and “to-go” plates to get. As I was picking up peas from the carpeted floor, a gentleman came up to me and said, “Excuse me, can I talk to you?” Usually this was a request for money, especially since they figured out I was the pastor. I hesitated. I was very tired. And I said, “yes?” (not very enthusiastically) and then He gushed, “Thank you, Ma'am. Thank you so much for the dinner. The food was so wonderful. I just don't believe this! Thank you.”

As he shuffled out the door I thought I saw Jesus for just a second.

This week someone in our congregation shared this story printed in Reader's Digest.

In Ethiopia, there is one doctor for every 40,000 people and never enough medicine. In Addis Ababa, American doctor Rick Hodes devotes himself to healing the poor. He sees twenty patients a day for free. Many travel hundreds of miles from remote villages to his one-room clinic, where he stops at nothing to get them what they need.

Hodes, who is single, has adopted five Ethiopian children, the most allowed by law. He started in 2001 to put two orphans on his insurance plan so they could have surgery in Texas. "It was kind of a scary decision, so I thought about it for a few days," Hodes recalls. "The answer that came to me was, God is offering you an opportunity to help these boys. Don't say no."¹

I think we can say with a great deal of certainty that Dr. Hodes is a sheep, not a goat in God's eyes. He sees God in the faces of these terribly needy people.

"Lord, when did I see you?"

The well dressed gentleman in the Cadillac stopped to refuel his car at the Point Convenience Store. The Point is a busy, if seedy, establishment on the fringes of a dilapidated downtown. Frequented by vagrants and day workers, it's the kind of place with bars on the windows and mostly beer in the coolers.

As he was filling up his shiny automobile, another man approached on foot. His eyes were downcast, as he came up to the gentleman with the white Cadillac. His hair was dirty. He was missing almost all his front teeth. He asked the stranger if he could spare a few bucks. The well dressed man said, "uh, no, I don't think so." But then he thought better of it, as the man shuffled off. Drawing a five out of his wallet, he chased after him, and said, "Hey, here you go."

"Gee, thanks, mister. Thanks a lot. I appreciate it. Most people, when they see me, they just want to turn away."

Whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers, that you do unto me.

This morning we will read a story to the children as they get ready to collect spare change for mission work. When I heard it, I thought of Jesus in disguise:

¹ 'Don't Say No', by Kenneth Miller, Reader's Digest, December 2008, pp. 128-135.

“I’m a little boy with glasses, the one they call a geek.
A little girl who never smiles ‘cause I’ve got braces on my teeth.
And I know how it feels to cry myself to sleep.

I’m the beggar on the corner. You’ve passed me on the street.
I wouldn’t be out here beggin’ if I had enough to eat.
Don’t think I don’t notice that our eyes never meet.²”

Lord, when did we see you?

In her book, Seeing Children, Seeing God, Pamela Couture says, “When [we] make [what turns out to be] an irrational commitment to all children (not just our own), it is often because [we] understand children to have been made in the image of God. [We] find the face of God in the face of each child.”³

Couture says children who live in poverty have something in common with God. Neither are easy to find. Especially in America, children of poverty are hidden. They are disguised. Somehow they manage to get decent clothes to wear to school, but their stomachs are empty and they have no supplies. Poor children and God are **both** behind the scenes, waiting for us to discover them. They wait for us to notice they live in institutions we contribute to (the Cumberland Children’s home, like the Waxahatchie home). They walk to school every day in their slouchy pants and their hoodies.

These children **are like God**. They wait for us, in disguise. Until we find some place where children **and God** begin to have a human, incarnate face.⁴ This is why it is so important that we do more than just give money. Why do something that is face to face. This is why we hold Arts Camp. This is why we welcome the African Children’s Choir. Why we deliver Meals on Wheels. Why we make sandwiches every month. Why we offer our building to the Ethiopian congregation. Why we open our doors to Life Net. This is why we support our Child Development Center. Why in 2009 we plan a mission trip and a mentoring program for kids who need it.

We start slow and begin small. It’s important we plan our commitments carefully, because people will really begin to rely on us. It’s important we make only the commitments we can keep. *But let’s not plan so carefully we end up not doing it.* Let’s not underestimate the

²“Don’t Laugh at Me” By Steve Seskin & Allen Shamblin

³Pamela Couture, “Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty”. P. 51

⁴Ibid, p. 53

transforming power of these small, regular commitments. Let's not underestimate the power of God in disguise.

We don't have to be a Dr. Rick Hodes. Very, very few of us will be. Sometimes we think that if we can't do something really big or dramatic, we might as well do nothing. This is not what the gospel says! The gospel says visit someone in prison; offer a drink of water; help a stranger, give some clothing, feed someone who is hungry. Because when we do this, we encounter God.

It may be a bit of a stretch to think of God hidden in the face of a homeless man, in the slump of the handicapped child, in the yearning of a young mother, in the eyes of a child. But it's really not much of a stretch. Because "God is love." And for there to be love, there must be an object of love. It's not that much of a stretch. We're used to stretching. Think of the Lord of the universe asleep on a bale of hay, think of a King with a crown of thorns, think of the God of ages hanging on a cross.

Sometimes the very best things God does stretch us. Sometimes the very best things God does are in disguise.