

Last Sermon At Grace Church: The Invisible People
The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Third Sunday After Pentecost; Proper 6, Year C
June 13, 2010

The world abounds with invisible people. In some places and times, these people were (or are) called slaves or servants, or women or children, or black or Jewish. They are the people who we fail to see, who huddle in the doorways, who are poor or powerless or broken or ill. The Hispanic dishwasher or landscape worker, the homeless, the ladies of the night, the refugees, all those who lives on the fringes of our society—a society that all too often values people by what they own or where they live or who they know vs. who they are: fellow human beings also belonging to God. If I paid attention, I encountered them each and every day when I commuted to New York City—those tucked away in doorways, careful to avoid the scrutiny of the police; those who kept their heads down and didn't complain, no matter what, so they did not invite the attention of immigration. One late winter day, I saw through the slats of a fence a young Asian couple huddled behind an apartment building dumpster, trying to stay warm, trying to stay out of sight. Invisible people seeking to stay that way—for safety's sake, for their own protection and survival. Often the thought that they may instead encounter mercy and compassion does not even cross their radar screen, for experience has taught them otherwise.

Invisible people are not just found in our cities, however. They live in suburbs and rural areas: a homeless encampment in the woods off a county road; the elderly, ill, or mentally ill living in our nursing facilities or institutions; the physically or mentally disabled; the neglected, abused, or even poverty stricken child in our schools (or missing from them) are our invisible people too. We choose not to see them or react to their needs out of discomfort or a misguided sense of not wanting to pry; we may feel helpless and overwhelmed and choose not to get involved. And so the invisible people remain invisible.

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But not to Jesus. Jesus sees the invisible people, and sees not just their illness or where they have fallen short or how they are “different” from those considered acceptable. He sees their hurt, their pain, those things that weigh them down and keep them from being free. He sees them for the beloved creation of God that they are, and does not turn them away; in fact, he invites them, through his very presence, to come forward and become visible once more.

The woman who entered Simon’s house, weeping and washing and anointing, was one of her community’s invisible persons. She was known by her label, and not her name: she was a ‘sinner’ and no more. To Simon, to the Pharisees and the other upstanding citizens of the community, there was no need to know anything further. Whatever was the story behind her story mattered not, her status had already been decided. She was relegated to invisible status, her sins beyond the reach of reasonable mercy and compassion.

But not to Jesus.

Whatever or whenever this woman’s encounter with Jesus was before this dinner party, we do not know. But it is obvious that either his words or actions or even his reputation had moved her to risk stepping out from the shadows and publicly and unashamedly offer these acts of very intimate love and service. Nothing, not the horror of the dinner host or the extreme discomfort she was no doubt causing the other guests, deterred her in her open and emotional attention to

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Jesus. And yet, even with her being present at the gathering in a very obvious way, she was still treated as invisible by Simon and the others.

But Jesus saw her beyond her label, beyond her sins. He saw a heart longing to be healed, a life desiring a new beginning, saw the woman she was and longed to become. He recognized her attentions as the risky actions of a woman deeply moved, one seeking compassion and mercy and forgiveness and willing to go to any lengths to communicate that. He did not dismiss her or ignore her, for she as a person, as a human being, was very visible to him—and he invited Simon to see her as well. Open your eyes, Simon, Jesus seemed to say, and see her with the eyes of God, the eyes that see the invisible people. See also, Simon, that you too are in need of forgiveness as well, despite all your meticulous law keeping.

As we all are.

None of us, Simon included, like to think that we have fallen short. We try to do the right thing, say the right words, present the image that the community or our families or our workplaces expect from us. But deep inside we know better, and fear being exposed for the sinners that we really are. So it may be that we choose not to see the invisible people because all too often they remind us of what lies hidden within us, that which we try to hide from ourselves: that we are sinners in need of God's forgiveness, in need of God's healing grace. We fear the same rejection that the 'invisible' people encounter, we fear becoming invisible ourselves. And so we carry our

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burdens quietly and carefully lest anyone see them, and in doing so, we fail to take the chance to lay them at the feet of Jesus.

The woman of our gospel story did not miss that opportunity however. She knew and made very clear that she was a woman in need of God's forgiveness, of a second chance, of needing to lay her burdens down. She did not hide her wounds, and neither did she hide her gratitude and love, a love made all the stronger and larger for her heart was no longer weighed down by sin and shame. For mercy and compassion proceed from love, they are intimately twined with love. That is the truth that is at the heart of the gospel, then and always. God's forgiveness always stands at the ready, waiting only for us to acknowledge our need for it, to ask for it, for God's primary goal is restored relationship, not satisfying a list of checks and balances—something we could never do on our own anyway. But Jesus can, and has, and asks us to have enough faith to bring forth—make visible—our carefully hidden burdens to him so that can relieve us of them, so we can be free to love, to see with the eyes of God, to see and love and extend mercy and compassion to the invisible people in our midst.

I want to thank you, as a community, for working hard at seeing and ministering to the invisible people: the clients of St. Paul's food pantry, the men of IHOC, the children of Kids Alley Café, those who attend St. Paul's breakfasts and dinners, those in need of medical treatment in Camden, the cards and notes and church bulletins sent to our shut-ins. And that is hardly an exhaustive list. Each act of compassion and mercy and love show forth that you are a child of Grace, in more ways than one. And I have seen that grace extended to one another as well, for I

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have been on the receiving end of it many times, and I thank you for your love and mercy and compassion. You will always have a special place in my heart, for it was here that I was ordained, here I celebrated my first Eucharist, here where I have been privileged to serve as your priest and pastor and to have the opportunity to love and care for you as well. I cannot deny the sadness of our parting, but I hold onto the faith that God is not done with me yet—and neither is God done with you. For there are plenty of invisible people yet to be seen and cared for and restored in this place, in this community, this county, in the world, and God asks all of us to take those invisible, intangible things like love and compassion and mercy and make them so incarnate in our lives that all are called into a restored relationship with God. See one another and those around you with the eyes and heart of God.

And know that I love you, I will miss you, and you have been and always will be a very special blessing in my life. May you always continue to bless each other and others beyond these walls as well.

Amen.