

Lent is a time of the year when Christians are encouraged to study their faith, to deepen their practice through prayer, living the “what would Jesus do?” question for as much of the day as you can manage, and taking time to just pay attention to how your inner self is reacting to all this.

As we enter Lent I want to offer you a slightly different way to think about the relationship between Jesus and God. And from that a different way to think about You and Jesus, You and God, you and others.

It starts off with today’s Gospel in Mark 2. Jesus has barely got going in his ministry, but already there have been miracles. But listen to what Jesus actually says. As he heals Simon’s mother-in-law he simply reaches out to a sick person, takes her hand and lifts her up. He does not say, “I heal you!” Then he is met by a leper who tells Jesus he can make him clean if he wants to. Jesus says “I do want to. Be clean” Again, he does not say, “I heal you!” Then a paralyzed man gets lowered through the roof of someone’s house, (enough to drive any home-owner extremely crazy) and Jesus says, “Your sins are forgiven.” Again, he does not say, “I heal you!”

A lot of Christianity seems to be about saying what a great man Jesus was. Evangelism is almost seen as “promoting” Jesus. But the words of Jesus, recorded by Mark, don’t point back at himself. Jesus is at pains not to becoming a local “idol”, and repeatedly tells people to shut up about his “miracles”. Jesus even chose an opaque title for himself, the Son of Man, which we would render as “any mother’s son”.

Something is going on here. Scholars have long worried about this and, what comes out of it is the feeling that maybe Jesus understood his work as assisting God in what God was doing. (The medieval and subsequent Church has tended to turn it around and say Jesus’ work was to change God’s mind about people. He used his leverage as God’s son to turn a rather grumpy deity towards being more benevolent. Finally he “paid” God, with his death, to deal with us differently.) But if you simply start out with what is actually in the Gospel today maybe, just maybe, Jesus was simply acting out of the God he knew so well, so intimately.

Jesus came into a world very different from our own. He lived in Judea, a culture defined by the belief that God had chosen them, and them alone, as his special people. As such they were granted an intimacy and an access to God unavailable to other people.

But...a big “but”Jesus found all sorts of people being excluded. Those with demons in them, (the mentally ill in our language) The sick, like Peter’s mother-in-law. Those with leprosy, like the next person Jesus dealt with. Even a paralyzed man, who everyone would assume was being punished for something sinful. Under the guidance of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (Equivalent to Catholic and Protestant clergy in our world) very few Jews had a hope of qualifying to be in the inner circle of God’s chosen people. The outer circle known, as sinners and the unclean, was wide and generous by comparison.

“Is this really how God sees people?”, we need to ask. Is God really like a quality control inspector rejecting 99.9% of his humans because they have some flaw or another? I have no difficulty seeing

this as a human tendency. Just look at our history of racism. Humans seem to be constantly finding reasons to exclude each other from the “in group”. But to me it does not seem like God’s way.

Perhaps, just perhaps, God loves his creation with the indulgent love of a parent. Perhaps God wills more for you than you dare hope for yourself. Perhaps God understands the need of the school bully to dominate a weaker child, not excusing it, but aching for the brokenness within the bully that makes him act out the cruelty he fears himself. Perhaps God has not withdrawn his blessings from the sick, the mentally ill, the lost and the broken hearted.

And so, perhaps you might see that the work of Jesus, in healing, is not about performing magical tricks so much as restoring people back into the circle of God’s Chosen Ones.

That angry, growling man in the synagogue can have friends now. A sick woman can cook and care and do the things she loves to do for others again. A man who, because he had leprosy, was forbidden to worship, to touch his wife or children or to walk in a village could go home again and be with his friends. And lastly, today, a man crippled by paralysis in his body, and crippled in his soul by the teaching that it is “all his fault and God hates him”, is set free, to be the man God made him to be, and to know God loves him still.

When Jesus says, “your sins are forgiven” he is stating a truth which is always true. He is not actually changing God’s opinion of the man. God forgives you even when the clergy don’t.

The heart of Jesus’ teaching is around forgiveness.

It is the holding of grudges that Jesus condemns. Forgiveness restores broken relationships. The restoring of relationship with God and with each other (think of Jesus’ summary of the law) is the great burden of Jesus’ teaching.

And when we begin to understand that all the miracles are actually to be understood as signs, these signs point towards the God whose love cannot be shut down. Like the Father in the Prodigal Son parable, God spends his days looking and longing for us to come back. Like the parable of the Good Shepherd, God does not just look and wait, but goes off to search, to find, and to carry home the lost and the broken.

So for Lent I invite you to try and see the world, the people in it, and especially the people you have to see every day, as I am suggesting God sees them.

Look past the outside. You can see Mrs. Fussbudget is an obsessive-compulsive person, but can you see her need to be loved and have a friend who is not put off?

You know Mr. Dankanddreary in the nursing home smells and shouts at people, but can you imagine the lost little boy in there, frightened by his own dementia, helpless in a wheelchair, powerless among strangers? You know heartless policemen, teachers who have given up hope, family members who are at war with each other, and a hundred other souls. Can you see through the dismissing-description to find the lost child, made in the image of God, the one for whom Christ would be prepared even to die, if that was what was needed to restore her or him?

This is the Lenten discipline I invite you to practice this year.

Whenever you find yourself dismissing someone as grumpy, stupid, angry, “always like that”, foreign or any other label that seems to be sticking to them. Whenever you notice this, stop. Look past that excluding label and look for the person within, the person God has already forgiven. Look for the person God is longing to bring back into the community. See beyond the crusty, corroded exterior, broken and battered. See as Jesus did. And, as you are able, do as he did. Reach out to touch. Meet the eye. Say a word of warm greeting. Cross the line of exclusion and be alongside, even for a moment. It is hard and costly. It is called the Way of the Cross. Welcome to Lent.