

See Me/ Isaiah 40:21-31, Matthew 25:31-45

A couple of years ago I came across a video about a man named Brian Peterson. In 2015 Brian and his wife, Vanessa, moved to Santa Ana, CA. In this video they stated that they had a desire to love their neighbors unconditionally and sacrificially. That may sound like an odd thing to say, as don't we all as Christians try to love unconditionally? But who also states that they want to love sacrificially and that this was something they felt called to do.

Brian went on to say that one night soon after they had moved in, he heard a homeless man start screaming on the street below his fourth floor apartment. The agony in the man's voice gripped his heart. This man, he thought, is my neighbor and I am called to love him. It was from that one night that the Faces of Santa Ana was born.

What he did after that night was to go and talk to the homeless on the streets around him. He would listen to their stories. After he heard their stories there were two things that he did. He would paint their portrait, he was an artist by trade, and he would try to track down their family online. He has successfully reconnected many homeless with their loved ones. Some were able to return to their families, but others still had to remain on the streets. Eventually he realized there needed to be more done to help these homeless brothers and sisters and so the second part of his work came to life.

He began selling the portraits to help these men and women whose faces he painted; giving them the money from the paintings. He soon realized, however, that they needed more than the money from the paintings. They needed housing, food, and other social services. He managed to connect many people with services for housing and in the process changed so many lives.

But he knew even that wasn't enough, because there were poor everywhere. Faces of Santa Ana expanded to be Faces of Mankind. Artists in many other cities, including Miami, Detroit, several in California, and even overseas in the United Kingdom are now painting portraits of their homeless neighbors and making a difference with the money and services they are able to provide. Brian's goal is that many more artists will take up this cause.

There are two things that stand out for me in this story. The first is that he felt a call to respond to God's call found in Matthew 25, which was actually cited in story I read about him. He wanted to love his neighbor with an intentionality to put that love into action by helping the homeless in some tangible way. And the second thing, which stems from the first, is that he wanted his neighbors to feel seen and heard and feel like they were important; and so he talked to them. He got to know them. He listened to their stories. Most of all, he saw them for who they were - beloved children of God.

This is what makes the difference between the goats and the sheep. It's what makes the difference of who goes to heaven and who doesn't in this parable. It's not that the goats can't see. It's just that they allow themselves to be distracted by other sights. Sights that are pleasing. It's easier to go about enjoying the finer things in life if we don't look too closely at the dire situation so many live in. That's why over time the poor have been pushed into housing near industrial areas where industrial pollution and food deserts cause health issues. Pushed aside where people of means don't have to see them, don't have to think about them.

I read an article some time ago on the topic of Death with Dignity. It dealt with euthanasia and the poor. I don't remember what country they profiled, but I think the poor of all countries probably would feel the same. The article talked about the fact that in this

country poor people were seeking euthanasia at an ever increasing rate, but weren't necessarily terminally ill. Many didn't really want to die, but they had no family to assist them. It was a daily struggle to live with illness and try to get food and other necessities to live; and, in the end, the easier solution was to just end it.

These poor men and women wanted what everyone wants – to be loved and cared for, to live life to its fullest but without so much struggle, to live and die with dignity. See me, they seem to say, but we don't. We know about them. We see them on the streets. But so many of us don't really see them. One speaker at a euthanasia conference said that the poor have a “cloak of invisibility placed around them”, that if we don't see them then we can't feel bad about what they are going through. Invisible. Unseen.

One thing that gets to me these days is the extreme right's view that if we talk about slavery, if we talk about poverty, if we talk about injustice in America, then we are making white people to feel guilty and they didn't have anything to do with slavery. And that is true. Slavery and issues like systemic poverty were all put in place long before any of us were born. Slavery in its known form ended, but slavery and poverty evolved in different ways over the decades and centuries – sweat shops, human trafficking, redlining. But Jesus never says we are to feel guilty about these situations. He never says we are to flagellate ourselves in penitence. We are, however, called to see, really see, and then do something about it.

One speaker at a Matthew 25 conference I went to said that Matthew 25 calls us into social introspection. What are the problems and what can I do to change those structures and systems that hold certain groups down? We are invited to see

differently, to see with the eyes of God. And then when we see to become engaged in more effective work to change the power structure, to create a more equitable society. We can be involved in the construction of a new and more equitable system. That is the goal of the Matthew 25 Initiative.

And in these times, seeing one another is more crucial than ever. Seeing the brown and black faces, hearing the voices that have accents who cry for help, feeling the hunger pangs of those who go to bed without having eaten all day. Those who are lonely or sick and are tethered to a home or a room without visitors. Those who are afraid of the government, afraid of the future. Afraid for their children's future.

We need to see. We can't help everyone, but we need to start by seeing. I see you. I see your hunger, your fear, your hopelessness. Let me help you take the cloak of invisibility off because I see you. All of you.

I have to admit that I haven't always been that socially aware and when I have been it was to do what so many people and churches have been involved in forever – helping at a soup kitchen, going on a habitat build; those kinds of things. I've never really thought about having the power to help create a radical change in society.

There's always been this frustration of feeling helpless in the face of the so much need, but that's what is so exciting about the PC(USA) Matthew 25 Initiative. It excites me to see the denomination attempting to have a very real impact on our society and around the world as we work on this initiative with our fellow PC(USA) churches, with ecumenical and interfaith partners in our own communities, and with our partner churches throughout the world. Coming together as God's voice, hands, feet, and heart to

bring change to a hurting world. No guilt, but a challenge to roll up our sleeves and respond to God's call to see.

These are ever increasingly challenging times. There will be more sorrow, more hurt, more hunger and fear. How this should, could, play out for this church is something I can't answer. Church resources will be challenged. Looking for ecumenical partnerships to achieve more for the community is something the Mission and Outreach Committee is exploring. In South Florida there was an ecumenical group of churches that came together and were making a big impact in the community in regard to poverty and homelessness.

We don't know what the future holds, but it is important for the local church to be looking at ways it can help, even small ways can make a huge difference in someone's life.

I was homeless and you saw me and gave me shelter. I was hungry and you saw my hunger and you gave me food. I was a single mother, struggling to work and to provide for my children and you saw my need and came and helped me through support and care and encouragement.

I was transgender and you saw me and welcomed me into your home. I was hunted and you formed a circle around me to save me from being disappeared. I was in prison for a crime I didn't commit and you saw me and came to visit me and you fought for my freedom. I was in a concentration camp and you stood up to the government and said, "NO!"

You saw and helped and when you saw and helped these my children, you helped me. Let us open our eyes and see and together through our love and commitment to Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has given to us so abundantly, let us then go and do. Amen.

