

Date: January 5, 2014
Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:10-18
Title: Recognizing One Another

A homeless man walked into a large church,
10,000 members strong.
Wanting to get a good seat,
he arrived thirty minutes early.
He spent some of the time
walking around the sanctuary.
Only three people spoke to him.
He greeted many others
only to be met
with stony silence and/or dirty looks.
When he asked for some change to buy food,
no one was willing to give him any.
Finally, he took a seat
at the front of the sanctuary.
Almost immediately,
two ushers approached him
and asked him to take a seat
in the back.
Later, after the announcements,
the man identified himself
as the church's new pastor
and said to the gathered community.
"The world has enough people,
but not enough disciples.
When will you decide to become disciples?"

Now, many of us have heard this story.
Yet, many of us may not know
that it is an urban legend,
perhaps developed by a pastor
to illustrate Jesus' words
"Whatever you do
to my brothers and sisters
you do to me.

Jesus' words are a call for us to recognize

that we are brothers and sisters
to one another.

Pope Francis alluded to this understanding
in his New Year's message.

There he said,

"We are all children of one heavenly father.

We belong to the same human family,
and we share a common destiny.

This brings a responsibility for each to work
so the world becomes a community
of brothers (and sisters),

who respect each others,
accept each other . . . ,

and take care of one another.

(May) the gospel of brotherhood
speak to every conscience

and knock down the walls

that impede enemies from recognizing
they are brothers (and sisters)."

Pope Francis' words echo Jesus' call
for us to recognize our kinship
to one another.

Far too often we fail to recognize
this sacred connection.

We allow

people's looks ~

their skin color, accent, dress, mannerisms ~
and their beliefs

and their actions

to influence our response
to them.

Quite plainly, we judge them ~

consider whether they are worthy
of being allowed entrance
into our inner circle.

If they don't meet our criteria or expectations,
we quickly and often rudely turn away from them.

Jesus says,

“Judge not that ye not be judged.”

There was a time when this behavior served us well.

A time when our survival or our community's survival
depended on our deciding
if someone were friend or foe
and then quickly acting on that decision.

But, times have changed,

and the judgments
we make about people today
rarely have anything to do
with our survival.

More often than not,

the judgments we make today
have everything to do
with what we have been taught.

They have everything to do

with learned beliefs and understandings.

A line in *South Pacific* sums it up nicely.

“Prejudice is not born in us.
It happens after we are born.”

I think one of the most heart-wrenching lines

in the *New Testament* is found
in this morning's reading from John.

“Jesus was in the world,
and the world was made through him,
and the world did not recognize him.

He came to his own,
and his own did not receive him.” (John 1:10-11).

The language used here blunts the emotional impact
of what happened to Jesus.

Jesus, who was with God in the beginning ~

Jesus, who brought all things into being,
who is the light of the world,

who enlightens all people ~
this man, who came that we might believe
we are God's beloved children,

this very man
was not recognized or received.
He was not recognized or received by
the wider world, the Romans.
He was not recognized or received by
his faith community, the Jews,
He was not recognized or received by
his family or even his disciples,
How utterly painful it must have been for him.
How utterly alone he must have felt.
No wonder he said
he had no place to lay his head.

Before I pastored my first church,
I worked as a staff chaplain
at Oregon State Hospital.
The movie, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, was filmed there,
and on occasion I walked through the basement
where it was filmed.
While there,
my primary pastoral duties included
ministry with older teens,
people with a wide variety of mental illness,
men and women with cognitive disorders
and brain injuries,
and men who had been found guilty
of a crime by reason of insanity.
To minister to any of my sheep,
I had to pass through a minimum
of two extremely heavy metal doors.
I learned many things during my thirty months there,
things about the people I pastored
and things about myself.
One of the most important,
if not the most important thing I learned,
was that all people,
regardless of who they
or are what they have done,
want to be seen as God sees them,

as beloved.

It is not our job to judge people,
to try to rule over them.

It is our job to journey with them,
to recognize them as our brothers and sisters
and to receive them as such.

Jesus wants us to recognize him
in every man, woman, and child
we meet.

I think that is he told us
that "Whatever you do to my brothers and sisters
you do to me."

If we cannot recognize our common humanity and destiny,
if we cannot greet one another
with respect, acceptance, and compassion,
and the state of the world and our relationships
indicate we can't,

then let us receive everyone we meet as Christ Jesus.

Recognizing Jesus in all others
will change our relationships, our communities, our world.

It will bring peace between warring factions
eradicate hunger, poverty, and treatable diseases,
and tear down walls and fences between people.

Our actions can usher on a world-wide communion
of peace and justice.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

(Lao Tzu)

At the beginning of this new year,

Let us resolve to ourselves and one another
that we will greet each person we meet as Christ.

As we know and recognize Christ in others,
we will become ever more fully children of God,
children of love,
for love begets love. Amen.