

In our house the most popular TV shows have the initials NCIS and CSI. The show begins with discovery of a crime and then comes 45 minutes of looking for evidence to prove who did the crime. The word evidence comes from Latin roots meaning “to see” as in what is seen is proof. The show always ends with the criminals being caught because of the evidence.

In these last teaching words of Jesus before he is betrayed and crucified, Jesus paints a vivid picture of time’s end; a judgment scene where some are rewarded and others cursed based on how they lived out our faith. God is not impressed with our Sunday school pins, church attendance record, how we looked, what we parked in our driveway or hold in our bank account. The evidence of who we are is measured instead in how we responded to the world around us, what of ourselves we offered back in response to Christ’s love.

In what was surely a scandalous thought in the 1st century, evidence of faith is especially seen in how early Christians responded to those who were weak, vulnerable, alone and afraid. These were exactly the people that Jews were taught to avoid for fear of being contaminated by their obvious sin. Deliberately taking care of the poor and the sick was not a high priority for people of faith. Better to spend more time in the temple doing holy things.

These words are among the most radical things Jesus ever said. They say something about the nature of God; that God is not “wholly other” as one theologian wrote, but a God who is involved in the messiness and ambiguity that is human life. The

face of God is not seen in some crystal cathedral but in the face of those who may be literally right at our feet.

Jesus' words say something about the nature of religion. In our world of daily headlines about religion used for doing horrible things, excluding and judging others as unworthy, his words suggest religion is true when its energy is used in helping those around us. His words say something about our nature as people of faith, that it is lived out personally in the way we treat those around us. We choose our words and actions in responding to the world. If we are Christians, then God, and indeed the world, look for evidence to back up our words.

We understand this and are willing to help those in need. Our nature is really more like Bob Cratchit than Ebenezer Scrooge. The stumbling block comes in our trying to define what true need is. We silently evaluate those who claim to be in need. We have clearly fixed personal criteria about what true need is and how we will respond to it. There are certain kinds of people we will gladly help and others whom we just as gladly ignore, certain situations we will allow ourselves to be involved in and others we studiously avoid.

We are taught, or painfully learn, that people can be deceptive, taking all that others may give. The takers are clever, resourceful and incredibly manipulative. Having convinced themselves that they are victims, they have no hesitation in taking advantage of people's generosity. When my dad lived with us, he helped deliver our church's Thanksgiving baskets. He came to one door and when it was opened, the person inside

said, “Just put the food there on the floor next to the baskets from the other churches.” It was the last time my dad helped!

If we could just see into someone else’s heart; see some clear evidence that the need they present is real, living out Jesus’ words would be so much simpler. Most of the time, however, we don’t get much to go on. There is a request and we choose how to answer.

What drives us to risk is remembering God’s actions towards us. In the person and work of Jesus Christ, God met our needs. When we feel vulnerable, weak, afraid and alone, it is God’s promise of unconditional acceptance that offers strength. When the rest of the world walks away from us God’s love for us remains. When crisis is our companion, we have a God we can trust to remain. It is the cross that declares this to be so. That is our strength.

This love offers no guarantee that we will not be hurt or taken advantage of. The world has been and is yet a broken place, where hearts are twisted and motives dark. God wants us to risk truly living life, which is always more about giving than taking. God wants us to risk loving those the world judges to be unlovable, to be free from obsessing about ourselves, or whether we are getting what we think is fair and right.

Artaban was the 4th wise man, at least in O. Henry’s short story. Having sold everything, he goes to find the baby Jesus with 3 jewels in his pocket, but he keeps being delayed when confronted by people with real needs. Each time he struggles with whether to help but each time uses one of the jewels to help the hurting. 33 years later, he arrives in Jerusalem just as Jesus is being crucified. Artaban is struck by falling tile

from the temple and as he is dying, those watching see him mouth the words, “Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.” Artaban realizes he found Jesus in the people he helped.

These are powerful words with which to end the church year, but they really sum up everything. If you are marked with the cross in baptism, it is expected to make a difference in how you live and act. Where is the evidence in your own life today?

+ Deo Gracia +