

## **Homily - Smile At the Stranger**

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I am one who believes God is active in our world. I have previously shared my story about following a car to church. The day before, my wife had announced she was filing for divorce. So, when I decided I needed to go to church, but had only been in California for two days, I decided to following a car that looked like it might lead me to a church. It did, and I spent the next eight years at that church. That was a God thing. Again, I am one who believes God is active in our world.

Fast forward nine years, and I was having a drink with a friend when I think God led me to Jeff, my husband. The friend and I had dated five years prior, and we had stayed friends. My friend had a moment of insight in which he said, "why have I never introduced you to my friend, Jeff. You are both Episcopal, you are both about the same age, you are both single, and you are both my friend. Let me give you Jeff's phone number." Jeff and I met two days later for lunch, and next week is the fourteenth anniversary of that lunch. Again, I am one who believes God is active in our world.

The thing that these two stories have in common is that I was in a frame of mind to be open to what was happening around me. On a whim, I was willing to try something new. I was willing to engage with strangers. Two important things in my own life happened in a flash. I could not have predicted them. I could not have made them happen.

Maybe in retrospect you can look at your own life and see some of these flash turning points. {pause}

Whether it is a job, or a relationship, or even an important ministry. God has been at work in all our lives. {pause}

Again, I am one who believes that God is active in our world. But, I wonder how many chances I have missed because I am oblivious. {pause}

Today's Gospel reading is often labeled "the road to Emmaus story." On the same day that the women found the tomb of Jesus to be empty, two of Jesus' disciples are walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. We know nothing about these two except that (1) one of them is named Cleopas, (2)

they are not the male or female disciples with whom Jesus were closest, and (3) the death and resurrection of Jesus had left them feeling were despondent and even overwhelmed.

And then, they don't see that God has come into their lives. We are told that "Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." We don't know why they fail to see Jesus, but two thousand years later, as we read this story we know these disciples have missed something big.

But, we also know they have set themselves up to see God by welcoming the stranger into their midst. Two thousand years ago, hospitality, even while walking along the road, was an important value. These two disciples were friendly with a stranger that starting walking with them. In fact they welcome him, tell him important things that are going on in their lives, and invite him to stop and have a meal with them.

And, the disciples are rewarded for their hospitality to a stranger. Their eyes are opened and they see God around them. They see and experience the risen Jesus whom they thought had been taken from them. And, with bursting hearts they immediately turn around and return to Jerusalem to tell the others that God had been in their midst as a stranger.

I don't know about you, but that is an experience that I want to have. I want my eyes opened to see our God who is already with us. Far too often, I am like the disciples in the first half of the story. I don't see God who is already blessing me and doing good things in my life.

Instead, I want to be like the disciples in the second half of the story. And, if we use today's Gospel reading as a lesson on how to open our eyes, then we see that we must be open to those serendipitous things and people that are already around us.

One of the complaints that I used to have about my dad was that he was always talking to strangers. My mother says that my brother, sister, and I used to get so frustrated with my dad when he was talking to someone again. And most of these time we just had to wait as my dad talked to someone he had never met before. As an older, wiser person, I wonder if my dad was on to something.

Here in California we have a culture in which we don't talk to strangers. How often have you been in the grocery store, and someone started to talk to you? I have to admit that far too often I wonder what is wrong with the person, what they want from me, or how I can make them stop talking to me. I miss an opportunity to be in conversation with someone new. I miss an opportunity to see how God may already be working in the world around me. Do you miss these opportunities as well. God is surrounding you with blessings, and opportunities, and people.

Some of us may be looking for new things in our lives. Conversely, some of us may be saying that we can't take on one more thing or that we don't want change. And, some of us are too busy to notice what God is doing around us. If you slow down, notice, and let it happen, then God will do good things in your life and in the life of your loved ones.

Now, in this time of Coronavirus, many of us are being forced to slow down. Maybe this can be a time in which you see God at work in the world around you. Maybe during this time of uncertainty you can embrace the good things God is already doing in your life.

And, this morning I want to give you one, practical, important thing to do in this time of sacrifice for the common good.

A few weeks ago, I noticed my own dis-ease when I was in the grocery store with others who might be infected. Even though I didn't say anything to those around me, I am sure my unspoken body language gave the vibe of "stay away." At the time, I spoke of this dis-ease, and some of you reminded me that I had a choice to succumb to the low road of telling people to "stay away" or move to the high road by being extra friendly to people. I could use my words to greet those around me, even when they were strangers.

A week later, when I was in the grocery store again, I wore a cloth mask, and I actually felt much more comfortable around others. Wearing a mask gave me a sense of control and gave me a sense of safety. I hope my unspoken body language did not shout out. And, I used my words to greet those around me.

However, I was reminded by another Master Gardener about something else I need to do when wearing a mask when in the grocery story. I need to smile with my eyes.

Smiling with your eyes makes you look like you are genuinely happy. Smiling with your eyes is hard to fake, and it helps to channel good thoughts so you'll seem more sincere. Once you get really good at it, you can even smile using only your eyes!

And, here are three things you can do to practice smiling with your eyes.

First, learn what your genuine smile looks like. Look at some pictures of yourself when you were really laughing or you know you were happy. And, then compare it to pictures when you are making yourself smile. See the difference.

Second, feel the difference. You have already notice how it looks different, so know think about how a genuine feels different. Practice engaging your whole face when you smile. On the other hand, remember what it feels like when you aren't smiling with your whole face.

Finally, even though it's a little tricky, you can imitate this full-faced smile by squinting slightly to create small pillows beneath your eyes. Look in the mirror and give it a try. If you produce crow's feet in the corners of your eyes while attempting this, you are doing it properly. Once you master the smiling-eye technique, you will be able to use it to brighten up even very sly or faint smiles.

This may seem silly, but it is important when we are wearing a mask to smile with our eyes so that we signal to the stranger that they are welcomed.

My prayer is that we are open to God who is already working around us. You may not need to follow a car to church. You may not need to jump at the invitation to meet someone new. But, I wonder if that stranger that is standing six feet behind you in the grocery store line will have God working through them in your life.

In these times, practice smiling with your eyes to a stranger so that you too may have a road to Emmaus experience with God.