

Sermon for All Saints' Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Several months ago, must've been sometime in the Spring, I went for a walk. Now, it may not sound like it, but this was a momentous thing. For one, we were emerging from Winter and those constant days of wet and mud and slush, and this was the first day of sunshine and enough warmth to leave the earmuffs behind. But also, something about covid felt like it was changing, too, in a way that I felt safe enough to crawl out from my pandemic cave and see the sun for a little while. Now, I couldn't've been outside for more than half-an-hour, but I made the lap from the house down Broad Street until the Baptist Church then back into the neighborhood and up Payne. As I was walking, I noticed something about my own noticing of the world around me. I noticed that I was making note of the people I saw. I only really stopped and talked to one or two and only waved at another three or four -- mind you a true record for in-person human interaction at that point. But that's not what caught my attention. What caught my attention was that I was keeping count. I counted every person I saw, whether up close or blocks away. If I saw a human being, I counted them. The pandemic made me hyper aware of where other people were, and on that short walk, I lost count somewhere north of 70 people. Most of them were random folks, almost all of them I didn't recognize: Colgate students and people from out of town and other people emerging from their pandemic hibernation into the first warm sun of the season.

These days, moments like that are a little less notable. We're seeing more people everyday, and we're scooching closer to our normal patterns of being in the world. But I wonder about the gift of that moment. See, we all know the pandemic with all its woes and limitations has made us appreciate the things we've taken for granted, the most obvious being the relationships that mean the most to us. So many people that we love that we just haven't been able to go and see. Or if we do, we take great pains to be careful in how we travel, aware of every little sniffle and every surface touched. But that day walking around town counting strangers, it's still got me wondering all these months later about the people we don't interact with but are still in community with. I've taken all of them for granted, too. I don't know if a walk around town always has 70 people somewhere in sight, but I'm guessing it's not all that unusual. Those folks that live their lives a block away from mine, they're people too. I know, that may be the most obvious statement I've ever made, but think about it. There's a full life lived in that professor reading a book on the walk to the office, a complicated plot line in the kid walking into school just after the morning bell rings, an amazing set of stories in the shut-in that just happened to peek out the door to check the mail as I walked by. They all tick those boxes from our Baptismal Covenant about respecting the dignity of every human being. But, with the exception of that first enticing day in the Spring, I rarely give the people in the periphery a second thought. I tend to be much more focused on the people in front of me. My friends and neighbors and all y'all that I actually talk to and see and do things with. Of course, it's not a bad thing to be focused, but it does make me wonder who all those other people are, what they ache for, who they love, why they hurt, how they search for meaning.

Last week, I told an unbelievable story about connection across time and distance, about how my grandma taught a Hamiltonian how to drive. And before that, I told you about my dad and his failed attempt at bullfighting. And before that, I told you about my friend Donnie and borrowed a story from Fr. Steve about his friend, Little Jimmy. And before that, we all heard about the many kinds of people our society insists belong in the periphery, too, pushed there by history and bigotry and ignorance. And long before any of those, someone wrote about Lazarus and his sisters and the amazing experiences they had with the very much in-the-periphery messiah that they loved. Every single one of those stories, and every single one of those people remain in the periphery for someone. Of course, Donnie and Little Jimmy are more in the periphery than some, my dad more in the foreground for others, but the truth is, most of us are only in focus for a handful, in the periphery for

more, and completely off the radar for almost all. Again, nothing inherently wrong with that, but there is a caveat. For us, for a people that seek and serve the dignity of every human being, for a people that strive to love God, love neighbor, love enemy, and love self, for a people that recognize the sliver of the image of God each person bears, we have an obligation to broaden our focus. Especially today, especially as we mark another passage of another year with another All Saints'.

See, on All Saints', we remember all those who have died, all those who are, and all those who ever will be across time in the history of the church. We zoom in on our own people and our own place, but we also recall those far-flung across place and time. We broaden our focus to include those who laid the foundations for us and those for whom we prepare the way. I wonder, though, if we were to take the beauty of that idea behind All Saints' and extended it into our everyday life, what would our church become? If we imagine that what we do now has real consequences for people we may never meet -- no -- if we recognize that our actions now do have real consequences for people we certainly will never meet, how would we live differently? If we know that our way of loving affects not just the people in our pews, but the people in the periphery, too, how would we serve? If we broaden our focus to include the strangers glimpsed walking a block away, who would we see? Spoiler: we would see God, we would serve God, and we would love God. And maybe we'd move God a little more out of the periphery, too.

Ever since that walk last Spring, I've been a little more aware of the bipedal shadows moving in my periphery. I haven't done anything about them, but I am a little more aware that they exist. And that feels like a start. A start to what, I can't say just yet. But if anything, it feels like a start to the beginning of love - the love of all the saints.