

My oldest brother sent me this, under the heading “something to think about.”

1. When one door closes and another door opens, you are probably in prison.
2. To me, ‘drink responsibly’ means don’t spill it.
3. Age 60 might be the new 40, but 9:00 is the new midnight.
4. It’s the start of a brand new day, and I’m off like a herd of turtles.
5. The older I get, the earlier it gets late.
6. When I say ‘the other day,’ I could be referring to any time between yesterday and 15 years ago.
7. I remember being able to get up without making sound effects.
8. I had my patience tested. I’m negative.
9. I’ve discovered that if I lose a sock in the dryer, it comes back as a Tupperware lid that does not fit any of my containers.
10. If you ask me what I am doing today, and I say ‘nothing,’ it does not mean I am free. It means I am doing nothing.

OK, enough nonsense. But I’m grateful for the privilege of growing older; far too many people never have this gift. First, a little background on the theology of this text. We remember that Mary Magdalene met the risen Jesus and just assumed He was the gardener and also, that on the road to Emmaus, the 2 disciples spent what must have been at least an hour with Him and did not recognize Him. Theologically, it seems that ever since the resurrection, we can find Jesus only in those who seem to be strangers.

And Jesus actually says this in today’s text. Jesus said that the norm for judging whether we had led the kind of life God intended was not based on how often we had married or practiced birth control, none of the minor moralities which some Christians insist upon – each one according to our own definition – but that we will be judged on how we treated *JESUS* when He came to us hungry, thirsty, lost naked, sick, imprisoned, as a stranger or alien.

Jesuit priest William O’Malley tells of a time when he was asked to preach on this text, and asked by the host pastor to do ‘something different.’ So Fr. O’ Malley went to the Goodwill store, got some old clothes, ripped them up, and pinned them back together randomly. He then went to the back of the church, and while the presider read the Gospel, he lurched from side to side of the center aisle with a bottle of whiskey in his fist, trying to get people to put money in his hat. He heard a woman gasp, “Harry, stop him! He’s going right up to the altar!” When he got to the front, the priest pretended to reprimand him, but O’Malley gestured to the presider’s chair and said, ‘You just sit down there, sonny. I -hic – can take it from here.’

Fr. O’Malley went to the lectern, put down the bottle, and said, “If you came to Mass today to find Jesus, you just missed him. He came up the main aisle trying to beg for money. And ya wanna know something? He didn’t get a dime.”

When we say we find God in others, I think we all try to really mean it. But I think what we should say is that we find God mostly just in NICE people. You know, people – like us. It’s a lot easier to respond to God in attractive, charming, welcoming people than with those who are pushy, dried up, arrogantly ignorant, sneering, bitter, or just plain smell bad.

Think about panhandlers. We’ve all been ambushed by them. The standard, practical response is to look away and pass them by. And we think to ourselves --they’re almost certainly going to spend whatever I

give them on booze or drugs, right? Especially if they're disheveled and smell bad. We can almost convince ourselves we're doing them a kindness by denying them any help. But remember what Atticus Finch suggests in *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*: Get inside their skin and walk around in it awhile. How did this person get where he is now? Quite likely he wasn't always this way. Would anyone really WANT to surrender his dignity, his self-esteem, to put out his paw and beg from strangers? And looking at it from a broader perspective, what's he asking for? No more than what we pay for a STARBUCKS coffee, or EGG MCMUFFIN. And it's Jesus asking.

For a term paper in a justice course, a senior went without showering or shaving for 3 days. He put on his grungiest clothes, went down to Manhattan, and hung around with people panhandling. He made about \$5 and decided to take one of his new-found friends to lunch with the credit card he had in his pocket. He discovered that the guy had an MBA but had overextended himself and lost it all – along with his wife and 3 kids – after he began drowning his sorrows in the sauce.

If we want to be serious about this gospel – and how we will be finally judged – but are honestly concerned that this money a beggar asks for food is really going for drugs, buy him a sandwich. If (as can happen) he sneers at that gift and really is a phony, we can at least have proven WE'RE not. Besides, so what if he does get a bottle of cheap wine and forget his troubles for a few hours and have a good sleep? Do poor people not deserve to get a break from their troubles? The question here really isn't whether the beggar is in authentic need but whether we are authentically kind. It's better to be bilked by 9 beggars in a row than to pass by the 10<sup>th</sup> who was really needy. And if we give a poor person a gift certificate at Christmas time, do we say, "Now, be sure to buy something practical – something I'd approve of." Is this a gift or a bribe to get him out of our face? Do we smile – or scowl? (adapted from *GOD: THE OLDEST QUESTION*, William J. O'Malley, p. 180-182)

Second, this all has to do with how we see other people. Whether we see them with God's eyes or our little, jaundiced eyes. C.S. Lewis wrote: "There are no *ordinary* people. We have never talked to a mere mortal....But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, ignore and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.....Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, our neighbor is the holiest object presented to us." (slightly adapted, quoted in David K. Naugle, *REORDERED LOVE, REORDERED LIVES*, p. 134-135) We will have finally gotten this when we genuflect to one another with the same reverence we genuflect to the tabernacle, especially people we do not like.

There is a certain mystical quality in the understanding of this text from Matthew, echoed in C.S. Lewis' words. In her autobiography, *A ROCKING-HORSE CATHOLIC*, the 20<sup>th</sup> century English mystic Caryl Chessman describes how an ordinary underground train journey in London transformed into a vision that changed her life. She writes of her startling experience: "I was sitting in an underground train, a crowded train in which all sorts of people jostled together, sitting and strap-hanging – workers of every description going home at the end of the day. Quite suddenly I saw with my mind, but as vividly as a wonderful picture, Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them – but because He was in them, and because they were here, the whole world was here too, here in this underground train; not only the world as it was at that moment, not only all the people in all the countries of the world, but all those people who had lived in the past, and all those yet to come.

"I came out into the street and walked for a long time in the crowds. It was the same here, on every side, in every passer-by, everywhere – Christ.

"I had long been haunted by the Russian conception of the humiliated Christ, the lame Christ limping through Russia, begging His bread; the Christ who, all through the ages, might return to the earth and come

even to sinners to win their compassion by His need. Now, in the flash of a second, I knew that this dream is a fact; not a dream, not the fantasy or legend of a devout people, not the prerogative of the Russians, but Christ in every man, woman and child....” (citation above, pages not noted)

Third, we can marry the text with this mystical insight and turn this diamond of a gospel passage to reveal yet another fascinating facet. WE are Christ. You and me, and every other person in the world. I conclude with one final reason for us to believe this deep gospel truth down to our holy toes. Richard Selzer is a physician and a gifted writer. In his book MORTAL LESSONS, he tells this story, demonstrating the profound solidarity we all share as children of one heavenly Father. He writes: “A man of letters lies in the intensive care unit. A professor, used to words and students. He has corrected the sentences of many. He understands punctuation. One day in his classroom he was speaking of Emily Dickinson when suddenly he grew pale, and a wonder sprang upon his face, as though he had just, for the first time, seen something, understood something that had eluded him all his life. It was the look of the Wound, the struck blow that makes no noise, but happens in the depths somewhere, unseen. His students could not have known that at that moment his stomach had perforated, that even as he spoke, its contents were issuing forth into his peritoneal cavity like a horde of marauding goblins. From the blackboard to the desk he reeled, fell across the top of it, and turning his face to one side, he vomited up his blood, great gouts and gobbets of it, as though having given his class the last of his spirit, he now offered them his fluid and cells.

“In time, he was carried to the operating room, this man whom I had known, who had taught me poetry. I took him up, in my hands, and laid him open, and found from where he bled. I stitched it up, and bandaged him, and said later, “Now you are whole.”

“But it was not so, for he had begun to die. And I could not keep him from it, not with all my earnestness, so sure was his course. From surgery he was taken to the intensive care unit. His family, his students were stopped at the electronic door. They could not pass, for he had entered a new state of being, a strange antechamber where they may not go.

“For 3 weeks he has dwelt in that House of Intensive Care, punctured by needles, wearing tubes of many calibers in all of his orifices, irrigated, dialyzed, insufflated, pumped, and drained....and feeling every prick and pressure the way a lover feels desire spring acutely to his skin.

“In the room a woman moves. She is dressed in white. Lovingly, she measures his hourly flow of urine. With hands familiar, she delivers oxygen to his nostrils and counts his pulse as though she were telling beads. Each bit of his decline she records with her heart full of grief, shaking her head. At last, she turns from her machinery to the simple touch of the flesh. Sighing, she strips back the sheet, and bathes his limbs.

“The man of letters did not know this woman before. Preoccupied with dying, he is scarcely aware of her presence now. But this nurse is his wife in his new life of dying. They are close, these 2, intimate, depending one upon the other, loving. It is a marriage, for although they own no shared past, they possess this awful, intense present, this matrimonial now, that binds them as strongly as any promise.

“A man does not know whose hands will stroke from his, the last bubbles of his life. That alone should make him kinder to strangers.” (p. 44-45)

Let the Church say Amen.