

DO WE SEE THEM

This past Thursday, I went out to McDonald's to have a conversation with someone over coffee, and while I was waiting in line there was a young lady ordering next to me. She had three kids under the age of five, and she was clearly feeling worn down, tired, weary. Obviously I didn't know any of her situation, but I did feel a great deal of compassion for her as she tried to order and reel them in at the same time.

Now a little backstory before I share the rest of my encounter. About two weeks ago, I found this Jimmy John's gift card in the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly. I picked it up thinking I was just removing some trash – probably an expired or fully used card. Little to my surprise, however, when I checked it at home, it had about \$15 bucks on it. I called Jimmy Johns to see if there was any way to track down its owner so that I could mail it to him or her, and they told me that there wasn't really any way for me to find the person – that it was just a prepaid card.

But I didn't really want this card. It felt like someone else's money.

Back to last Thursday now. So, here I am in this line, and a voice rings in my ears: "Pay it forward." A thousand other times I would probably have just ignored this woman, but, for whatever reason, motivated by this voice, I leaned over and asked her if I could just pay her bill. She had a look of astonishment and said, "really?" And I said, "yes." So she said okay, and, ironically her bill was nearly the same amount as what was on that gift card.

45 minutes later the woman came over to me and my friend, tapped me on the shoulder, tears in her eyes, and said, "I just want you to know that I spent the last week in Door County, all alone, with my kids. My husband had to work at the last minute and I was wanted to still give them a little vacation, but it was so stressful that I really wasn't having much fun. "To top it all off," I went to an ice cream place, and my little one was so excited about ice cream that she screamed in delight. And a man came over to me and said, "what's wrong with your kids" and made me feel so small that I just decided to come home. I was feeling very sour about people and about life, and my stress, and my husband – and along you come and offer to pay for my meal. God bless you. You've made me feel so much better."

I stood up and gave her a hug – and she squeezed me tight. She left, and I finished my conversation with my friend.

Here's my question for you. Do you notice the harried and hassled and broken and beaten and tired and lonely and lost and hurting? Do you notice them, or see through them to the goal that you have for yourself.

I must tell you, as I said earlier, a thousand other times that woman might have been unnoticed by me because I'm, so often, just thinking about what I have to get done. And maybe I would have not noticed her, if I had not, somehow, been led to pick up this card.

But what a reminder, for me, that God's love, and mercy, and compassion are needed all the time and in every place – and that we, as God's people, are called to be more mindful

In our text for today, we see the Jesus who notices – the Jesus who cares – the Jesus who acts. If you were to pick up the Bible from your pew rack and take a look at the headings in chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew, you would see that, preceding these verses of our text, Jesus came to a man with leprosy, he helped a Roman Centurion's servant, brought health to two demon-possessed men, a paralytic, a woman with a continual flow of blood, two blind men, a demon-possessed mute man, and raised a dead girl. He also comes to a tax collector named Matthew, the very writer of this Gospel, and calls him to be his disciple

Wow! What a day for Jesus. But if it wasn't clear enough from these paragraph headings and mindful actions of Jesus, Matthew makes it even more clear in our text. He writes, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Jesus notices. Let me say that again. Jesus notices. He noticed the man with leprosy, whom everyone was avoiding because of his disease. He noticed the demon-possessed men, whom everyone was avoiding because of their inappropriate screams and violent actions. He noticed Matthew, the tax-collector, whom everyone avoided because they viewed him as a traitor to the Roman and as a cheat. He noticed the woman, whose 12 year flow of blood had continually marked her as unclean.

He noticed. And He cared. And He acted.

Would you notice these people? Do you look around you and see the harassed and helpless – the hurting and lonely – and do you actually care about them?

Or are they just glanced over as the background noise while you think about your business, your own needs, your own problems – or worse, seen as an annoyance because they require an extra step, an extra word, an extra dollar, an extra measure of patience?

St. Paul reminds us in our Epistle Lesson that we were once the harassed and helpless. He says, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Lost, condemned, headed for destruction. But Jesus noticed. And Jesus cared. And Jesus acted. And on a hard wooden cross 2000 years ago, for harassed and helpless people like you and me, He opened up His hands and accepted our punishment, our pain, our brokenness and sadness and suffering and sorrow, and declared, “I notice you. And I am here – for you. As the Son of God, I bleed for you and offer to you everything I am so that you might be free of all these burdens.”

And we are free, because we know that there is, ultimately, nothing that can stop us from living forever in Him glory forever and ever and ever.

Because He noticed, and He cared, and He acted.

How will you react to such news? Will you be like the Pharisees, who immediately after Jesus does all these good things declare that He must be possessed by a demon -- Whose hearts are so blinded by their own self-interest that they don't even see the real needs of people.

Or will the Holy Spirit open up your eyes to stop looking past people and to start being mindful of the struggles and needs of the people you see?

Let me say it plainly. You are in the world. You are God's salt and light in our community. Each of one of you is a part of God's family, God's team. You have known and experienced the love and compassion of God. You are equally able to share with those who are harassed and helpless, helping them in their physical needs and sharing with them what Jesus means to you and what it means to belong to the church. There are so many who are floundering in the mire of upset, troubles and disasters in their life and they are looking to you to for help.

You may be the only one who has a consciousness of God's compassion in the places where you live and work. God needs you to represent the length and breadth and height and depth of God's compassion.

You might say, "But I can't do that! I'm just an ordinary sort of person! That's way out of my territory!" If that's the case then it's good that the calling of the 12 disciples immediately follows. When Jesus picks the twelve disciples, no specific qualifications are mentioned. One might think that the gospel writer would have mentioned that Jesus chose those men because of their prior experience, or their great potential, or their great spiritual insight. But we are told none of that. It's as if the gospel writer almost bends over backward to assure us that none of these people was special in any way.

Who amongst us here is qualified to heal a broken world and help those who are harassed and helpless? Yet he has chosen us to be his contemporary disciples. We may not be qualified, but by God's grace we have been authorized to be his disciples, and that's rather wonderful when you come to think of it.

Perhaps he sees in us more potential than we see in ourselves. Perhaps he can take the experiences that you have had in life and use those to help others. Perhaps he wants us to learn to lean on him and let the Holy Spirit use us to help the harassed and helpless. Jesus seems to delight in taking ordinary, everyday people, people who don't have any qualifications or credentials, and selecting them to be his disciples. He promises us that he will give us what we need to be his disciples. And then he sends us out into the world, to the harassed and helpless, to share with a dying world a word of salvation, and to offer healing for a broken people.

May God help you to notice, to care, and to act. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.