

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on September 9, 2018 (Proper 18B)

A few years ago a video made the rounds on social media about a pastor named Jeremiah Steepek who disguised himself as a homeless man before his first Sunday at his new 10,000-member mega church. He walked around with his thick, unruly beard and ratty clothes as people were filing in before the service. Only three people talked to him. He asked parishioners for money to buy food. No one in the church gave him any. He sat down in the front row. The ushers asked him to sit in the back.

After listening to the announcements at the start of the service, the church elders introduced the new pastor and everyone started clapping with joy and anticipation. As the homeless man in the back slowly started walking down the aisle, the clapping abruptly stopped and everyone stared at this unkempt, foul-smelling man. He took the microphone amid the awkward silence and started reciting Scripture: “For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.”

Then he told the congregation what he had experienced that morning, and many were moved to tears. Finally he said, “Today I see a gathering of people, not a church of Jesus Christ. The world has enough people, but not enough disciples. When will *you* decide to become disciples?” Then he dismissed the congregation until the following week.

This is a powerful story; one that can’t help but force you into the shoes of that congregation; one that makes you confront your own potential actions and biases and prejudices. Alas, it turns out that it *is* just a story. Snopes.com has since discredited this tale. There was no pastor by the name of Jeremiah Steepek. But the message and the concept remains a powerful allegory of how we treat people in our midst. It may not have been *factually* true, but the story highlights several deep truths. And I recalled this erstwhile parable after reading our lesson from the Letter of James.

Tradition has it that James was the brother of Jesus, the one who kept the early Jesus movement going in Jerusalem following the crucifixion. James was respected by everyone — both Jews and followers of Jesus alike — for his piety, devotion, and unwavering concern for the poor. It’s said he spent so much time in worship that his knees grew as hard as a camel’s. He was known to all as James the Just and his passion for the poor and downtrodden and those on the margins of society comes through loud and clear in this passage.

“For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?”

This could well have been the passage recited by the disguised pastor in our story. Because it’s precisely how his new congregation acted towards the poor man in the dirty clothes. They made him invisible; they took no notice of him; and when they did, they pushed him away into a corner. Out of sight, out of mind.

This passage from James is a tough lesson to hear, especially on a day dedicated to welcoming people back to church. Because, if we're honest with ourselves, we tend to be more comfortable with people who look like us and act like us and drive cars like us and live in neighborhoods like us. We shy away from difference — difference of opinion, of values, of socioeconomic class, of race, of religion. And we turn away to our detriment, as it limits the fullness and imagination of God's kingdom while simultaneously stunting our own spiritual growth.

If we insert ourselves into this story — and maybe I should start calling it the Parable of the Disguised Pastor — most of us wouldn't have spoken with him or offered to help him. There would have been plenty of excuses — and valid ones. We have to get the kids down to Sunday school or put on our robes or grab a bulletin or talk to a friend we haven't seen all summer. I know I couldn't possibly have helped; I mean, I have a service to lead, a flock to attend to.

And so this story, like James' letter, convicts us. It exposes our lesser angels. It reminds us that we have a long way to go to truly become Christ-like in our interactions with others. We are not bad people; but when it comes to discipleship, to following Jesus, we are all works in progress, rather than finished products.

Yes, we are made in *God's* image, but sometimes we want to make the church in *our* image. One that only includes people like us. And that's a pretty dangerous spiritual game to play. It's more comfortable that way, of course. It's easier to think about the church as a club for like-minded individuals rather than as a sanctuary for all. But Jesus didn't come into the world to start a club; he came to start a movement. One that transcends the external trappings of wealth; one that gets at the inner workings of the soul.

The thing is, the church must serve as a magnet to pull people in from the margins. People who may not look or think like the majority, yes, but also people taking that first tentative step back to church; people seeking a new community of faith; people who have been burned by religion; people in need of emotional and spiritual healing; people who don't fit the perceived parishioner prototype.

This is why we hear so many stories about Jesus healing people. These faith healings Jesus is always performing — like the Syrophenician woman's daughter and the deaf man in today's gospel reading from Mark — were physical healings, sure. And we can give thanks for someone made physically whole. But they were also, perhaps more importantly, symbols of bringing outsiders in. Into community, into relationship, into a life of freedom and joy.

Think about just how isolated these two people would have been. A woman considered ritually impure by virtue of her genetics with a demon-possessed daughter who likely caused a scene wherever she went. A deaf man, cut off and unable to communicate with others, kept out of the worshipping community as physical disability was considered a sign of sinfulness.

Jesus heals them, in large part, to bring them in from the margins of society; to include them in the larger community; to make them feel loved and cared for. It really is a beautiful act of divine, unconditional love. And he encourages us to do likewise. Not by giving sight to the blind or driving out a demon, but by reaching out our hands in love to those who most need it. By welcoming the stranger and breaking down the barriers that divide us one from another. When we do that — when we follow Jesus in heart, mind, soul, and action — then we can authentically claim to be his disciples. The world indeed has enough people, but not enough disciples.