

The one beside you

John 21:20-23

April 29, 2007

I want you to think for a moment about the person beside you ... the person to your left or your right, in front of you or behind you. I want you to close your eyes and think about that one person. With your eyes closed, picture that one person in your mind. What do you see?

You surely see someone who is not you, someone very different from you in all sorts of ways, but someone who is like you, too, someone who must carry in their mind and heart many of the same things you carry in your mind and heart, mostly hidden from public view: doubts and longings, disappointments and persistent hope, strong convictions alongside weak resolve, pride and shame, a hunger for God that has not yet been fully satisfied and that even so you often ignore.

You see someone who must be like you, but you don't really know. You may know that person well; you may know that hardly at all; but in either case, you can never know that person entirely. Even if that person beside you is your wife or your husband or your son or your daughter or your dearest friend, there are parts of them, the deepest parts of them, that remain and will ever remain inaccessible to you. You know what you see. You know what they tell you. But you cannot really know how it is between them and Jesus. There is no way you can judge another person's faith.

But this you do know. This you must know, that the person beside you is a person ... just like you. Like you a uniquely capable and uniquely beautiful human being. Like you possessed of uncanny strength and resilience but at the same time fragile and needy and vulnerable to injury in body and in spirit. Like you a son or daughter of God.

This you do know. This you must know, that Jesus commands you to love that person beside you. You can never know them fully. You can never really know what drives them most deeply. You do not know what will become of them or of you, but you do know that Jesus has told you: *Love one another.*

It's really quite simple! You only need to remember one thing: *Follow me!* Jesus says, *Follow me!* ... and you follow by loving God with everything you are and everything you have, and by loving the person beside you.

Jesus met Peter on the beach. Jesus gently and firmly lifted him out of the pit of shame and despair and invited him once again to follow. Jesus told Peter a story, the story that would be Peter's own story when he did choose to follow. Peter turned around and saw the one beside him, and asked, *What about him?* Jesus gave no answer. The only story Jesus will tell Peter is his own: *What is that to you? Follow me!*

Sometimes we make our faith a lot more complicated than it needs to be. We get caught up in theological debates about heaven or war, the nature of God or the divinity of Jesus. (*Follow me!*) We squabble over church organization and music and worship styles. (*Follow me!*) We worry about institutional survival and the "competition" across the street or across town. (*Follow me!*)

Or we say, *What about them?*

What about the Methodists, the Mormons, the Muslims? (*What is that to you? Follow me!*)

We ask: if Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, what about all the people who have never heard of Jesus? What about all the people who have heard of Jesus, but do not believe? What about all the people who lived and died before Jesus was born? (*What is that to you? Follow me!*)

Or what about people who die prematurely or who suffer terribly or live a miserable existence? Does God love them? Will God save them? Why doesn't God do anything to help them now? (*Follow me!*)

It's really quite simple! There is so much we do not know, so much we can never know, so much that is not ours to know. But we know enough. We know Jesus calls us to follow him.

But what does it mean to follow Jesus? You know! It's not that hard to figure out! How do you follow someone, make of yourself a follower of someone? You go where they go, you do what they do, and you try to be what they are. And the places and people to whom Jesus went, the things Jesus did, and the sort of human being Jesus was, are laid out plainly before us. It's really quite simple to understand what our Christian calling is. It may not be so simple to do it, but it is simple to know it!

You are called to follow Jesus. It's personal.

So much of the Christian life is about who we are and what we do together, about making community and being community, about serving each other and loving each other, about reaching out as a community, about bearing witness to Jesus' way as a community, about making a kingdom of God here on earth. It is true, indisputably true, that you can't be a Christian alone, that faith is not a private matter, that following Jesus has everything to do with the ways we are with each other.

But even so, faith is, first of all, personal, very personal, between you and Jesus, just you and Jesus, one to one, person to person. You can't miss that in the gospel of John. Jesus doesn't found a church or start a school or draft an army. He meets people -- he meets people! -- one by one by one by one, touching them at the point of their most deeply personal hurts or wants or needs ... and inviting them to follow. Nicodemus. The Samaritan woman by the well. The man born blind. The woman caught in adultery and dragged into the Temple. Martha at her brother's graveside. Mary Magdalene at Jesus' graveside. Peter on the beach. You ...

It's personal, about you and Jesus, about the story of your life as Jesus tells it. Let me illustrate with an excerpt from C. S. Lewis' *The Horse and His Boy*.

"I do think," said Shasta, "that I must be the most unfortunate boy that ever lived in the whole world. Everything goes right for everyone except me. Those Narnian lords and ladies got safe away from Tashbaan: I was left behind. Aravis and Bree and Hwin are all as snug as anything with that old Hermit: of course I was the one who was sent on. King Lune and his people must have got safely into the castle and shut the gates long before Rabadash arrived, but I got left out."

And being very tired and having nothing inside him, he felt so sorry for himself that the tears rolled down his cheeks.

What put a stop to all this was a sudden fright. Shasta discovered that someone or somebody was walking beside him. It was pitch dark and he could see nothing. And the Thing (or Person) was going so quietly that he could hardly hear any footfalls. What he could hear was breathing. His invisible companion seemed to breathe on a very large scale, and Shasta got the impression that it was a very large creature. And he had come to notice this breathing so gradually that he had really no idea how long it had been there. It was a horrible shock.

It darted into his mind that he had heard long ago that there were giants in the Northern countries. He bit his lip in terror. But now that he really had something to cry about, he stopped crying.

The Thing (unless it was a Person) went on beside him so very quietly that Shasta began to hope he had only imagined it. But just as he was becoming quite sure of it, there suddenly came a deep, rich sigh out of the darkness beside him. That couldn't be imagination! Anyway, he had felt the hot breath of that sigh on his chilly left hand.

If the horse had been any good -- or if he had known how to get any good out of the horse -- he would have risked everything on a break away and a wild gallop. But he knew he couldn't make that horse gallop. So he went on at a walking pace and the unseen companion walked and breathed beside him. At last he could bear it no longer.

"Who are you?" he said, scarcely above a whisper.

"One who has waited long for you to speak," said the Thing. Its voice was not loud, but very large and deep.

"Are you -- are you a giant?" asked Shasta.

"You might call me a giant," said the Large Voice. "But I am not like the creatures you call giants."

"I can't see you at all," said Shasta, after staring very hard. Then (for an even more terrible idea had come into his head) he said, almost in a scream, "You're not -- not something dead, are you? Oh please -- please do go away. What harm have I ever done you? Oh, I am the unluckiest person in the whole world."

Once more he felt the warm breath of the Thing on his hand and face. "There," it said, "that is not the breath of a ghost. Tell me your sorrows."

Shasta was a little reassured by the breath: so he told how he had never known his real father or mother and had been brought up sternly by the fisherman. And then he told the story of his escape and how they were chased by lions and forced to swim for their lives; and of all their dangers in Tashbaan and about his night among the Tombs and how the beasts howled at him out of the desert. And he told about the heat and thirst of the desert journey and how they were almost at their goal when another lion chased them and wounded Aravis. And also, how very long it was since he had anything to eat.

"I do not call you unfortunate," said the Large Voice.

"Don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?" said Shasta.

"There was only one lion," said the Voice.

"What on earth do you mean? I've just told you there were at least two the first night, and ----"

"There was only one; but he was swift of foot."

"How do you know?"

"I was the lion." And as Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the Voice continued. "I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who

drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you."

"Then it was you who wounded Aravis?"

"It was I."

"But what for?"

"Child," said the Voice, "I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no-one any story but his own."

And Jesus tells you no story but your own. Do you think yourself unfortunate, beleaguered, neglected, abandoned? Or can you see, can you hear, can you feel, the presence of the one beside you, the one who has been beside you from the first of your days, and who will remain beside you ... into eternity?