

Will They Know Us By Our Love?

5 Easter C

Jesus told his followers that the world would know they were Christians because of their love for one another. Why is it, then, that we sometimes fail to recognize each other? Whether on the street or in a church building the sign of love is the only calling card we need. On June 3, Trinity Sunday, we will be receiving some people, God willing, that we have invited to our open house. Some will be those who have not been to worship for some time. Others will be complete strangers. Whether they come back again will depend largely on what experience they have of you the average Christian. Some 35% of people who go to church come because they feel welcomed. This number is higher than that of liking the pastor.

For about one in every 50 people, distinguishing faces is difficult if not impossible. These people suffer from a documented disorder called prosopagnosia (ˈpräs•o•pagˈnozh•y), but because that's such a mouthful, it is often referred to as "face blindness."

People with mild forms of prosopagnosia do manage to memorize a limited number of faces, much like the rest of us might learn to distinguish one rock from another, but those with the more severe forms can't do even that. Gaylen Howard, a 40-year-old homemaker in Boulder, Colorado, says that when she is standing in front of a mirror in a crowded restroom, she has to contort her face to pick out which one is her. One of Howard's family members, also afflicted with face blindness, could not distinguish between the faces of Elvis Presley and Brooke Shields.

Until a few years ago, prosopagnosia was thought to be extremely rare. Only about 100 cases had been documented worldwide, and most of those were thought to be the result of brain injury. In July of last year, a published study in the *American Journal of Medical Genetics*, revealed that the condition is much more common than previously thought. Based on their studies, it is likely that there are more than five million people suffering from face blindness in the United States alone. What's more, their research found that many

cases of face blindness are not the result of brain injury, but of a defective gene. That means the disorder can be inherited. If one of your parents has face blindness, there is a 50-percent chance of your being afflicted with it as well.

There is no known cure, though most learn certain coping mechanisms. Many can distinguish people they know by looking at things like hairstyle, body shape or gait, or by listening to their voice. To avoid appearing to snub friends, some sufferers try to look as though they are lost in thought while walking. Others act friendly either toward everyone or toward no one.

Certainly face blindness was unknown as a diagnosis in the first century, but the New Testament has an actual example of it. On the first Easter, two followers of Jesus were walking on the road to Emmaus when Jesus joined them, but according to Luke, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:16). Only later, when he broke bread before them, did they realize that it was Jesus who was with them.

Of course, they were seeing the *resurrected* Jesus for the first time, so maybe that accounts for their temporary face blindness.

But even before the resurrection, when Jesus was among his followers, he alluded to a kind of recognition problem that the world could have for which Christians are responsible. In his conversation with his disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus told them that he loved them and that they should love one another. In fact, he called that “a new commandment.” In one way, it wasn’t new at all, for centuries before, the concept was articulated in Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Yet there was a newness about what Jesus said, for he intended that his followers’ love for *each other* should be a plain feature of their identity.

Thus he said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Although in other places, Jesus talked about loving neighbors and even loving enemies, here he is saying that acting compassionately *toward fellow believers* is the way that people outside the church will

know that they are his disciples.

That's a positive way to state it, but consider the flip side. Jesus implies that it's possible for Christians to live in the world *without being recognized as Christians*. To bring it right to our own day, Jesus' new command means that if the world can know we are Christians by our love for one another, the world can also fail to recognize us as Christians if we don't love one another. The world can have face blindness when it comes to distinguishing disciples from everyone else.

Loving enemies, of course, is desperately difficult, and loving neighbors is often hard work, so it would seem that by comparison, merely loving our fellow church members should be a snap.

In some ways, however, that is harder. Doing something compassionate for someone on the other side of the planet or reaching out to a person we see only occasionally doesn't require great emotional investment. But when it comes to members of our spiritual community, people whom we see up close and interact with frequently, it can be a different story. Just think how hard it can be at times to love members of our families who march to the beat of their own drummers.

Sometimes it's devilishly hard to really love those close at hand.

Yet Jesus set the bar very high for relationships within the church. He said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

These next few weeks we will be in training that we might internalize this command and put it into practice. We can go a long way toward dispelling the face blindness of those on the outside, and we enable them to see the features of Christ in the church he has called us to be.

They will know we are Christians because of our love for one another. Amen.