

# Repentance & the familiar stranger

*Sermon preached by Dr. Kathy Bozzuti-Jones, Director of Children's Ministry,  
at the nine o'clock service, July 5, 2009: The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on Mark 6:1-13.*

## A story

On a crowded subway car, I shimmied into a seat, held my elbows close, and began to read AM New York. Actually it was less a 'shimmy' and more a conquest. I am not a happy subway rider, in general, and on this day I was determined not to stand all the way to work. Before long I heard the sound of a train car door opening, like a squealing animal followed by a vacuum-sealed silence as it shut again. I saw a woman step through. She was wearing a dirty t-shirt. Her hair was disheveled. Her arms were filled with small plastic bags with clothes flowing out of them. And she held a paper coffee cup that jangled. Before long, she began a loud, rehearsed speech asking for money. Typically, I would give a little money to a person who asks. But on this particular day, with sweaty elbows jabbing into me, and my morning coffee apparently not having kicked in yet, her voice sounded grating, like the squealing animal of the subway car door. I was simply annoyed to have had my reading disturbed. And nothing more. Someone else seemed to have had a similar reaction and lashed out at her unkindly; she cursed him out and moved along.

At Grand Central, when I got out, the woman got out. For some reason, instead of racing for the train on the opposite track, as I normally do, I stood and watched her movements. She walked leisurely to the long wooden bench and created a whole narrative in my mind about how she was some kind of scam artist. But what I witnessed told another story. She stopped in front of a familiar older gentleman, who sits in the same seat, hour after hour, day after day, with hardly a sign of life. The woman then set down the bags of clothing at the man's feet. She placed the cup of coins in his hands, propping it between them, while he slept, head hunched over. As my entire body began to fill with shame over having neatly sized her up and judged her without mercy, the woman did one more thing. She lifted the man's head gently, raised it

up, kissed his mouth, and then gently lowered his head again. I believe he slept through the whole gesture. As the scales fell from my eyes, they were replaced with tears. Then she was gone, only her loving witness remained, plunging me deep into thought about how it both indicted and inspired me. Who was this mysterious woman?

## The Story

In today's Gospel passage from Mark, I see various parallels to this experience. I had observed a poor woman's selfless witness, a witness to compassion, undeterred by jibes, preconceptions, and disdainful judgments. Reported in all four Gospels, the first part of today's Scripture passage recounts Jesus' rejection in his own homeland. How painful that must have been to be reduced to a "mere" carpenter, as if that fact made him an unworthy witness to God's love. How painful it must have been for the woman on the train to be reduced to a "mere" beggar, as if that fact made her an unworthy witness to the goodness of Life

Jesus, returning to his hometown, goes to teach in the synagogue—on the heels of performing a great string of miracles among a crowd of believers. It all begins well enough but soon turns sour, as he is insulted for being Mary's son and for having a common trade. He is viewed as a familiar son of Nazareth, turned sham prophet, perhaps, scandalizing the people by something he must have said. Perhaps because of Jesus' amazement over their lack of faith in God and God's message of the Kingdom, Jesus is barely able to perform a miracle, except for a few healings.

To use Barbara Brown Taylor's metaphor, the experience was like lighting a match to a pile of wet sticks. It is not that Jesus' power was diminished, but if the viewer is unable to open his or her heart to a miracle, the miracle ceases to serve as testimony to the power of God. Had I been unable or unwilling to open my heart to the gesture of love offered to the lonely homeless man, it would not have been a meaningfully

gesture, only it would not have served as a testimony to the goodness of human nature. I was blessed to have received this testimony because it prompted my heart to see in a wholly new way.

“God is all around us, speaking to us through the most unlikely people,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “sometimes it is a mysterious stranger, but more often, I suspect, it is people so familiar to us that we simply overlook them.” If we refuse to listen, “then we should not be surprised if Jesus leaves us/to go shine his light somewhere else.” (from her collection, *Bread of Angels*)

As Jesus names the Apostles to go out and shine their lights, he gives specific instructions about how they are to comport themselves. Essentially, they are to head out with a few important things: The Good News, each other, and a walking stick. This is not a statement of self-sufficiency. Far from it. It is a statement of communal dependency (Brian P. Stoffregen). Both by their words and by the actions of healing and “dealing with evil opposition (*The Message*)”, the Apostles led people to repent—to be moved so much, that they changed their minds and their lives, recognizing in them the amazing reality of God’s gracious forgiveness.

### **Its Significance**

“*The Message*” a Gospel paraphrase by Eugene Peterson explains why Jesus’ instructions to the Apostles are so specific concerning what to carry and how to shine their lights. The paraphrase goes: “Don’t think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. You are the equipment.”

People are hungry to hear the Gospel—by our

witness to love, by speaking truth to power, by the gentle actions whose symbolic value may call someone like myself to repent. Our lives are the equipment. The disciples lived what they believed. That’s all there is to it. If we were to strive harder to live what we believe, our witness could change the world. I am not talking about door-to-door evangelism (that has its place in other traditions); I am talking about living lives that attest to our belief that God’s love is unconditional—and that faith in God’s loving-kindness changes lives, including our own.

Be assured, if the word ‘repentance’ falls upon your ears the way it falls on mine, conjuring up images of punishment and feelings of guilt, this is not the case. The Bible’s understanding of repentance is more like this: Repentance is a change of mind (like my ‘a-ha moment’), prompted by a change of heart, resulting in a changed life. The idea suggests accepting people where they are—and inviting them all—us all—to see and to act in ways that appreciate and reflect the abundance of love we have received. Nothing could stop the subway woman from shining her light and sharing her gifts. God counts on us to let nothing deter us from being instruments of compassion and repentance

May you practice, therefore, recognizing God in yourselves and in every one. May you seek repentance with an open heart, an open mind, and a deep belief that you are loved just as you are—a minister with the authority to act on God’s behalf. May you seek repentance for the good of the world, for the restoration of relationships, and for future generations of believers.

*Amen.*

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