

Have you heard about the homeless Jesus statue?

There was a story about it on NPR (National Public Radio) a few weeks ago.

Basically, in Davidson, North Carolina there is an art installation outside of St. Alban’s Episcopal Church. It’s a bench with a man wrapped up in a blanket. His hands and face are covered, but his feet are exposed, showing the wounds from crucifixion.

The piece has gotten mixed reactions from the community. Some people were really unhappy with it. They felt it made their neighborhood look unsavory. They worried that it would invite *actual* homeless people to make their neighborhood home. Still others thought it was insulting to depict God in such a way—it was demeaning to their faith and the community in general.

One person believed that it was not a statue at all—but a real person—and she called the cops. She called the police on Jesus!

But there are others from the congregation and surrounding area who see this statue differently—they see it and feel a visceral connection to their own faith. The priest of this church said, “It gives authenticity to our church.”

Some people sit down next to the homeless Jesus and touch his feet or head while they pray. They are reminded that Jesus really had no home. He moved from place to place and, luckily, people often invited him to stay with them.

The statue is supposed to remind people of a passage in the Gospel of Matthew: Jesus says to those welcomed into glory, “Come, inherit the kingdom, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to eat, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” They ask, “When did we see you?” And Jesus responds, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:31-40, paraphrased)

Jesus reminds his listeners that God can be found in the stranger...that God can *choose* to come to us in unexpected and unassuming ways.

There’s certainly a history of this sort of thing happening in the Bible. In the book of Genesis, the LORD appears to Abraham, but Abraham doesn’t know it. He is sitting at the entrance of his tent and looks up to see three men. Abraham invites them to sit, and eat and drink and it isn’t until much later that he realizes that God had been by to visit him.

And then, of course, there is the Gospel reading from this morning—yet another way in which God appears through a stranger.

Two men are walking along a road to the village of Emmaus. A stranger appears and begins walking with them. The stranger asks what the two men are talking about and they tell him all about Jesus, and how he died, and how he was the Messiah. They talk about the empty tomb, but not about the resurrection, and the stranger (Jesus!) gets frustrated that they *still* don’t get

what's happened. He explains everything that's been prophesied and everything that has happened...but they *still* just see a stranger.

It isn't until they are sitting around a table, when he blessed and broke bread, that these two men finally see and recognize Jesus for who he is. Their engagement with this stranger brought them into the presence of God.

Reading this story, it seems a bit silly. How could these two men *not* know the stranger was Jesus? How could they not recognize him? He's talking about scripture, prophets, and how Jesus fulfills all of the promises about the Messiah.

And yet...until Jesus sits down with them to share a meal, they don't recognize him.

We're often just as dense as those two men when it comes to seeing Jesus in our lives.

We're part of a world that doesn't expect to see God breaking in. We're used to everything being scientific, or factual, or always having a rational explanation.

Like those two men, we can find ourselves blind to God walking beside us, blind to God talking to us about fulfilled promises and risen saviors. We so often only see what we want to see, or only see what we think we *should* see.

But, somehow, God still manages to pop up. Jesus still manages to insert himself into our lives, whether we're looking for it or not.

I'm sure we all have a story (or have all at least *heard*) a story about a person who was just going about their lives when God showed up to surprise them. God wasn't recognizable at first, but eventually they came to realize that they had been close to the divine.

I was able to witness one of these moments a few years ago. I was working in a hospital as a chaplain intern. It was my night on-call, but I was expecting a quiet evening—even though we were a level-one trauma center, I had never been called in after normal business hours.

This particular night, though, that wasn't the case. I got paged and hurried down to the Emergency Room. I found the nurse who had paged me and she filled me in on what had just happened.

A father and son were driving across an overpass when they were hit by a semi. Their car caught fire. The son managed to get out of the car but his only escape from the burning wreckage was to jump off the overpass onto the highway below. The father never made it out of the car and was dead by the time paramedics got to him. The son had been brought into the ER and was being worked on. He had burns over large parts of his body, along with broken bones and internal bleeding.

After taking a moment to compose myself, I entered the consultation room where this young man's mother was waiting. She had gotten the phone call that her husband and son had been in an accident and got a ride to the hospital with a good friend a neighbor. It was heartbreaking to be with her. To hear her tell me that she had called her other son and told him about the

accident—but she didn't tell him that his father had already died. She told me she didn't want him that upset while he had to drive.

So I sat with this woman and her friends and some family members who had trickled in. They talked about the man who had died. We prayed together. I accompanied the woman to the bathroom where she broke down in my arms, sobbing. I made her drink some water and take small bites of food someone had brought back from the café down the hall.

At one point, this woman stepped out of the room for a few minutes. The friends and family still in the room started sharing stories about this man who had so recently died. They told me how he used to love playing jokes, how he was the nicest man you'd ever meet, how he was generous, and trusting and loved music.

I realized something at that moment. I had come into that situation expecting to "bring the Jesus," if you will. I had assumed that God would be working through me to bring some small, tiny measure of comfort and peace to these people...but God had a surprise for me.

Yes, certainly, God was doing something through me, but God was also doing something rather remarkable through all of these people in this family's life. God was there in the stories, the laughter, the tears, the jokes, the *love* these people shared.

God likes to pop up when we don't expect it. But I also take great comfort and joy in the knowledge that I know some places where God *always* shows up.

In the story of two men on the road to Emmaus, Jesus appears in the breaking of bread. It serves as a reminder that God is *always* present in the bread and wine we share together in communion.

God is there, whether we're aware of it or not.

Amen.