

“Who’s Sitting Next to You?”

1st Pres San Bernardino

2 Cor 5:16-17; Mark 4:26-29

6/14/09

Rev. Dr. Sandra R.Tice

Sections in italics are actual questions from worship on 6/7/09

Well there you are, sitting next to me again.
Funny how, week after week, I choose *this* pew. 500 seats in this sanctuary,
and I choose the same one every time I come.
But it’s nice to have you here- feels familiar.
We know where ‘our’ seats are, you and I,
Almost as if we’d carved our names on them.
I don’t really know you, though... I mean, I wish you the peace of Christ,
maybe we talk about the weather.
But I don’t know what you are thinking or feeling or hoping
as you slide into that familiar seat.
There was that one time, when we finished singing that hymn, where I saw
that you were moved, that your brown eyes were wet with tears.
I knew that it was important, but I didn’t know what to say.
So I looked the other way and pretended not to notice.

++++

Well, there you are, sitting in your regular spot.
How do you *always* manage to get here before I do? Sometimes I wonder if
you spend the night on Saturday!
I have to admit, though, that seeing you makes me know that I am where I
belong, that I am in the right row.
Though we never really talk, it makes me feel welcome, somehow.
We have something in common, you and I-
sharing our opinion about the Best Seats in the House.
And I love that you wear red so often- it brightens up our pew.
More than that, though.
All these years of speaking confession and singing praise, of calling each
other to worship, and of sharing in prayer- I feel a bond with you.
Invisible and mysterious, (I can’t explain it exactly)- but real.
Who knows how it grew? But we have been here, night and day, and
something has grown up between us over the years.

+++

What would you do, I wonder, if you knew what I was thinking?
If you knew the questions of my heart, the things that I wonder about and
worry about.
Would they seem silly to you?
Would your brown eyes dart the other way, Looking for an escape?

Probably. It's probably just me anyway.
No one else wonders about this stuff,
No one else doubts.

+++

I come in late, and I sit by myself.
I wait 'til I hear you all singing, and then I slip in and sit near the back. It seems like everyone knows where they're supposed to sit, and since I am a visitor, I don't have 'a spot'.
So I wait 'til everyone else is here, then slip into an empty seat.
Am I really welcome here? I know I am welcome on third Saturdays, And the food really helps, and the people are really warm, and they invited me to come.
But now that I am here- I feel a little intimidated.
I wonder what you'd do if you knew what I was thinking.
How many of you know about a pregnant teenager or a child in jail, or a family member addicted to drugs?
How many of you have worried about finances?
Not many, I'm sure.
Just look at you: so 'together', and so confident.
I did see that one man, in the professional suit, dabbing his eyes during the sermon.
But probably he just has allergies.
He can't possibly have questions like mine.

+++

I suppose its easier for you, now that your kids are grown. I bet you actually have time to pray, you're not running between soccer games and laundry and birthday parties. You don't have to worry about job insecurity or making the mortgage payments. You have all the answers to questions like mine:

**Will I be happy and content with my life in 5 years?*

**Why are there times when I don't feel like a Christian? There are times when I think I fall very short.*

**My 7 year old asked, "Where did God come from?" My only response was, "God always was." What should I have said?*

**How can you (God) love me still, knowing who I really am?*

**What is Your plan for me – how can I be of better use to You?*

+++

Was believing God this difficult when I was as young as you are?
Did I have all these questions back then? I don't remember-

It seems like it was easier, the problems were so much more manageable: no skinned knees and hurt feelings rather than pregnancy or addiction or legal trouble. What would you think if you knew what I was wondering?

**Why can't our children see life & the choices they make as clearly as we would like them to?*

**How do I deal, gracefully, with aging issues – memory problems, health changes? Why these diminishment as the end of this life nears?*

**How do you decide when it is someone's time to come live with you?*

**Why, when I've exposed my children to Christian learning since they were small, have none of them joined the Presbyterian Church anywhere?*

**How do I find my way to You? How do I know if I found You?*

+++

I *think* you mean it when you say I'm welcome, but it takes a long time to feel like you're not just a visitor. It takes a long time to belong.

Meanwhile, I wonder what you'd say if you knew my real questions. Would you be offended? Would you understand? Would you care? God knows.

**Why are people drawn to hurt others? I don't get it. Some are all about making other's lives difficult. Why are some affected by this & others aren't?*

**Why do people preach love and community and yet leave some to sit on the outside looking in yet not feeling welcome?*

**Is this church open to the homeless, needy, and hungry; are they allowed to attend services without a cold shoulder?*

**How do we help bring about the end of religious strife and hatred?*

+++

**Why am I so often afraid?*

+++

**Is God with me in my loneliness?*

+++

**What is it that keeps me from really recognizing Your presence except in times of great need or sorrow or even great beauty. What about all those other moments of my life?*

+++

There you are, sitting next to me again.

+++

There you are, sitting in your regular spot.

+++

I come in late, and I sit by myself.

+++

(ALL 3 IN UNISON) If only you knew.

(readers leave the chancel, Sandy leaves character and summarizes)

These questions were not written by me, they were not designed for the sermon. These are questions written by the people sitting next to you, questions that were placed in the baskets at the end of worship last week. Frankly, they stunned me with their depth, their sacredness, and their trust. They show me that the Spirit is on the move in our church family, helping us to notice the longing inside us that leads to transformation.

The kingdom of God is growing among us, I know not how- I sleep and rise and meanwhile in your hearts, seeds of holy discontent and of compassion and of longing for God are growing.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. This is true, of course, at crossroads moments when we make decisions to follow (as the new member class is doing now). But it is also true in every moment in which we are puzzled or flummoxed or in need- and we turn to Christ. It is true in the daily uncertainties and decisions and fears we face. When we take our questions to the Risen Christ, something new is created.

Who's sitting next to you?

A New Creation. The Kingdom of God.

Thanks be to the Risen One. Amen.