

Sermon—Fifth Sunday in Lent, B, 2015
All Saints Episcopal, ATL
The Reverend Stefanie Taylor

Today's gospel begins with a request of Philip: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." However, the King James translation is a little bit stronger: "Sir, we would see Jesus!" It is more of a demand; it expresses more of sense of urgency and entitlement. In today's culture, the idea of entitlement brings about negative connotations. For me, it means you belong to my generation and everything that's wrong with our society is our fault because we were coddled too much as children. Quick shout out to my parents who will be listening to this later online... because they think I'm awesome. However, today's gospel invites us to reimagine what entitlement means. Another way we can think about entitlement is our inherent right to claim something of great value.

Because in today's story the presence of genuine love has knocked down the power structures that separate people from what belongs to them. As children of God, we all have the right to acknowledge that we are holy and beloved and created with purpose. We have the right to claim our gifts, to share those gifts, and to bathe in God's love.

In today's gospel there are a group of people whose souls are troubled and their instinct is to demand an audience with their God. Remember, these particular people are gentiles; meaning, not Jewish. During that time, Gentiles were thought of as people who didn't know the true God. Among some Jewish people, Gentiles were considered unclean and unworthy. Yet,

these Gentiles, being on the outside of the religious culture feel they have some claim to Jesus.

I imagine, to the religious elite present, which wouldn't even speak the name of God or draw a picture of God, thought this demand was further evidence of Jesus' lack of divinity. They could put it on top of the pile labeled "radical Jesus and why he isn't God." Yet, it is precisely Jesus' radical nature that points to his divinity. In today's lesson from Jeremiah, we read, "the days are surely coming... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... no longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, 'know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no more."

That's a pretty powerful promise from the Old Testament and in today's gospel, we are witnessing the fruition of that promise... even Gentiles feel they have access to God. And not just semi-access where they go through an approved channel to connect to the divine—but direct, no strings attached access: Sir, we would see Jesus! In that one claim I can hear the echo of the Old Testament ringing out, "for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest!"

And yet, there are still power structures in place today that cause us to shrink just a little bit. We are told we aren't pretty enough or smart enough. Right now, 1 in 4 young women in college are suffering from an eating disorder and the suicide rate in our country is soaring. In our culture, we are made to think we don't quite belong, that our family is "different" or that what we

have to offer isn't unique enough. In a sense, the world robs us of our confidence and we fade into the shadows just enough not to be noticed. We stop claiming the holy that was given to us at birth because we have forgotten that it was ever there.

We all have our gentile identities; ways that society is set up to prevent us from integrating, from feeling like we belong. But as children of God, it is our right to demand an audience with Jesus. Because we belong to him. Because we were made in his image. Are you gay, lesbian or transgender? Guess what, you belong to Jesus. Are you black? Well, you are probably closer to Jesus' skin color than me and you belong to Jesus. Are you female? Did you notice who Jesus trusted with the central message of our faith—the message that he was risen from the dead? It was Mary Magdalene, a female, whom Jesus trusted with the single most important piece of his final story—that he is risen. Are you a criminal? So was Paul, yet he went on to contribute more books of the Bible than anyone else. Are you a white male and feeling the pains of a society that is overcorrecting? Well Jesus didn't appreciate people overcorrecting and getting their own justice—you belong too. Are you not very intelligent? Well, take a close look at Peter—half the stories I read about him elicit an image of those around him rolling their eyes—and yet, he was beloved by Jesus. Are you too fat, too skinny, too shy, speak with an accent, or anything else that might make you feel like you don't belong in God's family? Today's story is telling you that your creator is radically in love with you and therefore gives you unrestrained access to him.

Still, I understand that sometimes knowing that about our God is not enough for us to feel that access. There have been times in my life when I badly wanted to connect to God—practically screaming in my prayers, “where are you?” And the silence I felt in return seemed deafening. I know that happens.

I remember on the day I was to be ordained a priest, I walked into a packed church and everyone was singing St. Patrick’s Breastplate—you know the one, “I bind unto myself this day the strong name of the Trinity.” Anyway, they were all singing and I got this overwhelming fear that I wasn’t good enough to be a priest. I had this sudden urge to turn and run from the church and never say my vows. After all, I was young, I had no experience, I wasn’t really the star student in my hospital chaplaincy class, I didn’t feel like I could preach a sermon—*in front of people*, and I knew, deep down, that I wasn’t a very good person. It was a painfully lonely moment.

Suddenly, the tune in the hymn changed. If you’re familiar with the hymn, you know the part I’m talking about—when the music shifts and we sing these words: “Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.” And at that moment, I felt the warmth of the Holy Spirit wrap herself around me and all those fears melted away.

Sometimes, our fears are too much and we cannot break through them on our own to feel the presence of God. For me, in that moment, the packed

church gifted me access to God. At that crucial juncture where my courage failed and I almost ran out of the church, experiencing my gentile identity in my most public encountering with God was exactly what was needed.

Essentially, the grace I felt from God was intimately connected to the fact that I embraced my true identity amidst so many people who were different from me. Who might judge me. And who might deem me unworthy. God does not require us to be different from who we are, but only to have the social courage to bring who we are to all that we do.

In that moment I had to trust the people around me with holding me up as I felt so exposed. Their faith, their prayers, and their worship lifted me to a place where I could accept pure love. It's why we come to church. It's why we kneel shoulder to shoulder with one another as we eat his body and drink his blood. Sometimes, acceptance of Christ's radical access requires courage and sometimes, we just don't have that courage.

This is why we come to the alter for healing instead of simply staying in the pew and praying by ourselves; it's why we study the bible together at Sunday school instead of keeping it in our nightstands for our eyes only. It's why we faithfully show up to Pancake supper every year despite the fact that, let's be real, almost none of us actually like Pancake supper. Because together, we might believe we are part of something bigger. We just might believe we belong and that belief can lift the veil that the world has put over our eyes and we just might be able to see ourselves as God sees us and in the process, we might see Jesus too.