

## They Were Watching

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost C, 8/28/22

So – be sly: game when you arrive and where you sit for maximum benefit, so that the people see you as humble but also come to think of you as wise. But then, be Timon of Athens, giving what you’ve got to them that can’t give back – the lame, the halt, the blind, the down-and-out, the lost-and-lonesome, the ones that didn’t get invited to dinner at all, whether to a high place or low. Whatever you do, give a straight answer but not a clear one, keep the people on their toes, and keep them guessing. Never let them see you sweat or stumble or come up for air or think they know what you’re going to say next. Watch your angles, read the room, work the crowd. They’re watching. All eyes on you. What do you want them to see?

Not enough is made, especially by those who think they follow this man faithfully, of Jesus as Performance Artist – Performer, if you like – and in what ways being on stage and on show might’ve shaped his words and deeds. We don’t think as much as should about how much what he says and does, or was remembered to have said and done, happened as it did because throughout his public ministry he conducts as though on stage or on show. He knew it, even if they did not. They wrote down what they thought he said even when they didn’t know what it meant, figuring that someone would, eventually, and hold them faithful for having borne faithful witness. Showing Jesus as Performer even if you’re not sure what play this is or what act we’re on is a way of bearing faithful witness, and being wiser than they might be ‘ware of. For one thing, all the world’s a stage and all of us merely players thereupon, our acts being seven stages, as Shakespeare’s Jaques so mordantly reminds us in *As You Like It*. We each have our seasons and we all play our part, going from one darkness to another hoping never to be deceived or waylaid on the way. For another, Jesus, like all of us who are accustomed to public speaking and public thinking, teaching, music-

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making, or expressing ourselves, has to be aware of and in control of what he's doing and of who's watching and why if he's going to make it out there. This Son of Man, or more precisely Son of Woman, has to reach the people where they are and bring them where he wants them to go – and he can't do that by staying home or doing what he does without calculating for effect. No prophet is accepted in his hometown, as he knew better than most, which means that he, too, will have to take it on the road, even take it on the run, baby, when it became clear that they didn't want him around, even if he wasn't (quite yet) under the gun.<sup>1</sup> (Maybe that was what they feared, way back in that synagogue in Nazareth. “Sure, he speaks the truth,” you can imagine them saying, “No doubt about that. But all that saying it out loud's going to do is get us all killed.”) For he would be soon enough – Jesus, that is, and under the gun, that is, or at least the nails and spears, of the Temple in Jerusalem, of Herod, and of Rome. The Pharisees he went to dine with in this gospel passage knew it, even if the Nazarenes hadn't, and even if his disciples didn't (quite yet). They'd seen this movie before, and they would see it again – and by the time the gospels had been written down, they'd seen that and worse.

You see, these people were no fools. They'd seen hope ride in before on a white horse or a gift of healing, seen one bright spark after another wake up and realize that the decks of the world were stacked against them. They'd heard them vow as God was their witness that they were going to do something about it. They'd seen what happens to such people, time and again. Quickly they rise; quickly they fall, leaving those who figured out how to get on with the powers that be, while there was a way, behind to pick up the pieces. But every time a new one rode in, or walked in, the thongs of whose sandals the last one by said that even he was unworthy to untie, they

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Gary Richrath, “Take It On the Run,” song from the album *Hi Fidelity* © REO Speedwagon, 1980.  
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wondered. Maybe this time – maybe this one can do what we all know needs to be done.

So they kept watch, paid attention, asked hard and sometimes dumb-sounding questions, testing, probing, seeking, wondering. They watched Jesus to see if he was as good as they said he was, if he was right, if he was worth it, and if he really could move the needle, get people to understand what was really going on, and then help them or at least use them to change the world for the better. They were watching to see if he could show them how to use their own religion and frustrations to do it themselves as well as he could, once the perfect injustice of the world caught up with him and put him in his grave. What will he say next? What will he do next? What will we do when he does it? They asked themselves these questions, and now and then they asked him. We're all on stage, here, buster, out in front of the whole world, and if you're as good as everyone says you are, you're better than we could ever hope to be, so don't let us down. Surprise us, challenge us, lose your temper and call us names if you have to; just don't let us down. And you, brothers and sisters, who witness these things from the box seats or the peanut gallery, you keep watch, too. Watch and learn. This might be the real thing.

What did they watch? Him watching back, telling them to be sly and wise and not proud, gracious to a fault with outsiders, and to understand where they fit in the world, even if they and he didn't quite fit it. As the covers of your bulletins show, the lesson that stuck with them and with future generations was the importance of practicing radical hospitality, even providing free food and a place at the table for those who couldn't afford their own and maybe didn't even deserve it. Invitation-only feasts really weren't his thing, truth be told; nor was holding on to what you got when your neighbors have need of it or could use it better, though he also did say, "Cast not your pearls before swine," not to mention the part about being as

shrewd as snakes, so there's that. Your neighbors, too, after all, are called upon to be at least as generous as you; what goes around...

As we were reminded this week regarding the issue of student debt relief, and might well have been regarding the issue of where the Rohingya people are going to live, since no-one appears to want them around, the question of who deserves charity, kindness, and to have their burdens lifted is as challenging as it is persistent. However, most biblical material is of one mind about it, and Jesus is of that mind himself: when in doubt, be as generous as possible – and the answer to the question, “Who deserves to be treated that well?” is “Everyone.” That includes the prodigal son, and the provident son, both – and it includes even Jesus himself. Remember the extravagant gift of anointing with the spiced graveside perfume that he got from Mary of Magdala? Generosity is like that – it applies as much to those who give as to those who receive and then must give in turn. It can heal broken people and unite divided families. It can heal wounded hearts and unburden the prideful of their resentments and pride, which are often the same thing. Last but not least, it helps us grieve. It's hard to remember all this, I find, which may be why Jesus brings it up so much.

It isn't just him. Not for nothing did the laws of Moses and the prophets who tried to enforce them insist that every fiftieth year be a jubilee year, with all debts forgiven (at least all non-commercial debts) and all enslaved or indentured persons set free. Once every generation, give or take, people would experience this, if it ever actually happened – the ultimate Sabbath rest, lasting one whole year. During that year, they were supposed to leave even the land fallow, mindful perhaps that before they had been slaves in Egypt they had starved in Canaan, and after they were set free they still went hungry in the wild. They went hungry, that is, until the Lord sent manna and quail, though if He was in one of his many piques the gift-quail tended to turn up poisoned. Thus we learn the perils of dependency, one might say, as well as what it's actually like to fall into the hands of a living God. But we also learn that we're all in

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this together, have only each other, and simply have got to be kind. As this morning's reading from Hebrews ends, "<sup>13:16</sup> Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

They were watching – the Pharisees, that is. Remember the Pharisees? Jesus went to dine with them, after all, even if he also went to give them some things to think about. As I said, they were watching him closely, to see what he would do and to see whether he meant it. No doubt they saw that he did, and heard that he did. At least some of them went away thinking that if he's not the one, he's doing an awfully good imitation of them. He gets it, we know he gets it, and he knows we know he gets it. What we don't know yet is whether he knows what comes next, but even if he did, it wouldn't matter. Those who set out to change the world through other people by inspiring them to accept what they already know needs to happen don't care how that change happens, just that it happens.

The Lord was watching, too. All of this. This was his beloved Son, after all, with whom he was well pleased. You don't think he was paying attention to what his last, best hope for humankind was down here doing? As the searing lesson from the Book of Sirach makes clear, the Lord can solve these problems whenever he wants to. "<sup>10:14</sup> The Lord overthrows...thrones...and enthrones the lowly .... <sup>10:15</sup> The Lord plucks up the roots of the nations, and plants the humble in their place. <sup>10:16</sup> The Lord lays waste the lands of the nations, and destroys them...and erases the memory of them..." That He chooses not to leaves us the chance to do so, without anger or pride, doing what we can to heal the world and make lives better while they last. The opportunity won't last forever; once it's gone it isn't coming back. When we lose once and for all the chance to make someone's life better – when one whom we love finds the cancer returned, the depression takings hold, or that the heroin or the fentanyl win – what would we not give for the chance to be generous again, have one more day to give them whatever we have that they need? *Amen.*

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