

"Home: Belonging through Being Seen"
John 5:1-9

There is a famous study that often gets cited when talking about seeing the needs of others. In 1973, "social psychologists John Darley and Daniel Batson wanted to know why people help in some situations but not others. They decided to study one allegedly charitable group: seminary students training to become priests.

The researchers asked each of 67 seminary students to deliver a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan, a Bible story about helping strangers in need. The researchers then randomly assigned the students to one of two conditions. In the hurried condition, a research assistant concluded the sermon instructions with "Oh, you're late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago. We'd better get moving."

In the unhurried condition, the research assistant ended the instructions with, "It'll be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head on over."

Each student walked alone to the building where he would deliver the sermon. On the way, the student encountered a man slumped in a doorway with his eyes closed, coughing and moaning, clearly in distress.

From afar, researchers watched: Would the seminary student stop to help the stranger in need?

Darley and Batson found that only 10% of seminary students in the hurried condition stopped to help the man. In comparison, 63% of the participants in the unhurried condition stopped. In other words, being in a hurry can lead even a seminary student with the Good Samaritan on the mind to ignore a person in distress.

When pressed for time, people must choose between helping and meeting other goals. But when people are not hurried, they can pursue multiple goals, in order of importance." (Stanford: [Take Time to Be a Good Samaritan | SPARQ \(stanford.edu\)](https://www.stanford.edu/sparq/take-time-to-be-a-good-samaritan))

Seeing the humanity of others is not always easy for us because it is not a social skill that we emphasize in a society that focuses on success and production. Yet, we all long to be seen and our fulfillment as human beings depends on this simple and yet powerful skill of connection.

I am grateful for the example Jesus left us to know the power and importance of seeing others. Story after story in the Gospels emphasize Jesus' ability to see the humanity of each person, regardless of their social status or physical abilities.

In today's Bible story we hear about a man who had been waiting for healing for 38 years and every time he had a chance to get healed, someone else would beat him to it. People believed that the water was stirred occasionally by an angel and that whoever got into the water first after that, would get healed. Every time for thirty-eight years, someone put themselves first before this man.

The scene was that of competition for God's grace. There was only so much healing to go around and one had to fend for themselves. This is much like the perception of the seminary students who thought they didn't have enough time to help someone else.

Let's listen to John 5:1-9

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

² Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. ³ In these lay many sick people—blind, lame, and paralyzed waiting for the water to move. An angel of God would come down to the pool from time to time, to stir up the water; the first one to step into the water after it had been stirred up would be completely healed. ⁵ One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' ⁷ The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.' ⁸ Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' ⁹ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

The theme of water in the Gospel of John gets repeated several times giving us the insight that water has the power of healing and rebirth. Jesus himself is the water of life. And here by the pool of Bethzatha, people were being healed by the water. And yet, this man who could not walk fast enough to get in the water was being overlooked by people for 38 years. Jesus heals the man and gives him his dignity back to make him walk on his own and carry his own mat. And the miracle started when Jesus saw the humanity and the suffering of this man. Even though there were many sick people all around the pool, Jesus somehow sensed and saw the despair of this man after so many years of waiting and of being invisible to others around him. No one cared to help him get in the water and the competition was intense.

Being able to truly see others is not always easy. We assume things about others. We judge them. There are also those who are invisible to us. I have heard this often from older people where they feel invisible to society. Jesus gave us an incredible example of always being able to see those who are on the margins and to bring them fully into the center of grace.

There is a story that is "told of Jennie Jerome, who later became Winston Churchill's mother. It's said that when she was young, she dined with the British statesman William Gladstone and left thinking he was the cleverest person in England. Later she dined with Gladstone's great rival, Benjamin Disraeli, and left that dinner thinking she was the cleverest person in England." (David Brooks)

There are so many ways we practice not seeing the humanity of others. David Brooks outlines some of them:

- Egotism: Self-centeredness
- Anxiety: Too much noise in our own heads about how we are coming across
- Naïve Realism: Confusing subjective seeing with the myth of an objective view
- The Lesser-Minds Problem: We only judge people by what we see or hear from them, forgetting that they have just as much complexity as we do. We just only have access to our own thoughts and complexity
- Essentialism: Stereotyping and making generalizations about people and groups
- Static Mindset: Only staying with the view of the person at one point in time without allowing room for change or growth

The good news is that the ability to see people is something we can learn. We are not doomed to always be stuck in overlooking the complexity and the humanity of others. In fact, some cultures have as part of their social skills development for children the ability to connect with others deeply. The Germans call it “herzensbildung”, training one’s heart to see the full humanity in another. The Koreans have the concept of Nunchi which is the ability to be sensitive to other people’s moods and thoughts beyond words, reading the room. Here is a clip about Nunchi: <https://youtu.be/Y0lmdHF3kZk>.

How might we do this in our own lives? How can we learn from Jesus to see someone who was overlooked for 38 years?

David Brooks writes, “We’re not equal in might, intelligence, or wealth, but we are all equal on the level of our souls. If you see the people you meet as precious souls, you’ll probably wind up treating them well.”

Brooks tells this story from Nazi Germany. “Dr. Ludwig Guttmann was a German Jew who escaped Nazi Germany in 1939 and found a job in a hospital in Britain that served paraplegics, mostly men injured in the war. When he first started working there, the hospital heavily sedated these men and kept them confined to their beds. Guttmann, however, didn’t see the patients the way the other doctors saw them. He cut back on the sedatives, forced them out of bed, and started throwing balls at them and doing other things to get them active. As a result, he was summoned to a tribunal of his peers, where his methods were challenged. “These are moribund cripples,” one doctor asserted. “Who do you think they are?”

“They are the best men,” Guttmann replied. It was his generosity of spirit that changed how he defined them. He continued organizing games, first at the hospital, then for paraplegics around the nation. In 1960 this led to the Paralympic Games.”

That is the power of seeing others as God sees them! Amen.