

## **Beloved Children of God, One and All**

A Sermon at the Episcopal Church at Yale

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### **REFLECTION:**

Please take a moment before we begin the service and share in the chat the name or, if unknown, a description, of someone who has served you whose work you fear has gone unacknowledged. We will take a moment to recognize these individuals now.

*20 seconds*

Thank you. Please keep these individuals in mind as we begin our worship.

### **SERMON:**

In high school, I spent many Friday nights serving dinner to 90 homeless and housing insecure guests at St. James Church.

The guests returned week after week, and years later, many of their faces are as clear in my mind as those of my high school classmates and teachers.

Yet while the evenings have blended together in the years that have passed, one particular event is marked in my memory as a crossroad: a point at which I was forced to re-evaluate and reconsider my own choices.

That Friday night, as I finished seating the guests, I noticed that one of the nine chairs at the table was empty.

I asked the regulars if someone was sitting there and after a brief moment of uncomfortable silence, one man spoke up.

The chair, he explained, was reserved in honor of another guest, who he described as always wearing a neon orange work vest.

I nodded as he continued, explaining that in the week that had elapsed, the man in the orange vest had fallen between train cars while asking for money on the subway.

Unaware of his presence, the train had continued all the way down the line, dragging his body beneath it until it reached the terminal.

This death of anonymity struck me as the most basic and foundational injustice. The lack of recognition of his humanity prompted me to reconsider every previous interaction – as if to reassure myself that I had appropriately recognized his personhood and treated him with the respect that he deserved. However, in truth, none of us did. I am not speaking of myself or the other volunteers at the Church, but rather of the larger Christian community, American society, and the government. This story is undeniably tragic but by sharing it with you – and as many individuals as I can – I hope that this man’s death will not be pointless.

This week’s Gospel passage speaks of Jesus and his disciples visiting Simon and Andrew’s house, to heal Simon’s mother-in-law. Upon being healed, the mother-in-law – who is notably nameless – serves Jesus and his disciples.

When I first read this passage, I was struck by the disregard for the nameless woman who, once being healed, is expected to rise and serve the men. At first glance, I assumed that she was required to serve because she was a woman, and while this may have been true, my immediate judgement kept me from acknowledging that perhaps she herself deliberately chose to serve Jesus and his disciples. Perhaps, this woman’s action was meant to reciprocate Jesus’s act of healing, which was itself another act of service. Perhaps, this interaction was not that different than the one we see between Jesus and his disciples on Maundy Thursday when they wash one another’s feet.

Similarly, I tried to hypothesize why the Gospel may have left Simon’s mother-in-law without a name. Maybe it was oversight, or blatant sexism, but I am inclined to believe that there was more thought put into this choice – a purpose in leaving this woman without a name. I have come to the conclusion that the nameless mother-in-law was not an instance of disregard, but instead an omission done to generalize her story.

Instead of being Simon's mother-in-law, she could be any woman. She could be any child of God.

I am the first to admit that I do not know the man in the orange vest's name. I have regretted not asking his name since his death nearly five years ago, and it was not until I read this Gospel passage that I came to a place forgiveness. It is my hope that the man in the orange vest's anonymity can serve - much like Simon's mother-in-law - as an opportunity for all of us who now know of him, to learn. He is not that different from the individuals whose names we all just listed in the chat moments before. He is someone – and represents everyone - whose life, and then death, was not acknowledged as it should have been.

In remembering the man in the orange vest's anonymous death, I am reminded of the coronavirus death tolls that rise every day, leaving us without ample time to remember and bury those who have passed.

These days are full of tragedies and I wish more than anything that we could be like Jesus and heal the pain of those around us, however, our skill sets do not match up to His.

But, as we move into our reflection rooms, I urge you to think about what it is that we, as individuals, can do.

How can we better recognize our responsibility to those we serve?

How can we remind ourselves that the individual we serve one day, may serve us just moments later?

What can we do each day to remind ourselves that unnamed and anonymous individuals – like Simon's mother-in-law and the man in the orange vest – are God's children just like us?