

Seeing the Face of Christ in Others

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Chattanooga, Tennessee

When I was invited to speak today, I asked a group of you what I should talk about. One of you said, “Tell us a **story**.” A second one of you replied, “Tell us something really **positive**.” A third said, “No. Tell us what you **really think** of us.” [Pause] So I will try to respond to all three requests.

I. First, a story. About 20 years ago, when I was on a weekend retreat at a monastery out in the middle of nowhere, I took an afternoon walk and was approached by a stranger. With some excitement in her voice, she told me that she had just seen the face of Jesus in the bark of a tree in a nearby forest. With some cynicism, I told her that I couldn’t even see the face of Jesus in the people with whom I worked each week—much less on the side of a pine tree. Later that afternoon, however, I did see the face of Christ in a stained glass window of the abbey where I was staying. It was just a coincidence—God’s way of remaining anonymous. I later learned that the artist, who just happened to be a close friend of my spiritual advisor at the time, had designed the window so that the face was discernible only at a certain distance. If one were too far away—or too close—the image couldn’t be seen at all.

Ten years later, back in the real world where I was practicing psychotherapy and teaching ethics seminars for Emory doctors, I accepted an offer to teach my first class in a Christian counseling training program. I **came** to Richmond because I thought I would enjoy the challenge of teaching ethics in a Christian counseling program. I have **stayed** at Richmond because my life has been transformed—by **you**. When I think of the relationship I’ve had with you, I am reminded of all the pieces of the mosaic that comprised the stained glass window depicting the face of Christ. **Each one of you** is like a brightly colored piece of an intricate design. Yet, the image of Christ becomes clear only when one stands back in contemplation and sees the picture as a whole. From this perspective, I see not only the image of

the face of Christ, but through that image I see the faces of the people whose lives are transforming others.

II. In response to your second request, I’ll tell you something really positive: As you sit here today, just as you sat through hundreds of hours of classes, you only get to see the **backs** of each others’ heads. From where **I** stand, however, I get to see your **faces**. [Pause] When I see you, **I see the face of Christ**.

1st Eyes: Some of you are the **eyes** of Christ, not only seeing in others what they see in themselves, but also seeing that which they **do not** see in themselves. In other words, you not only see where they have **been**; you see where they are **capable** of being. And in doing so, you help others become what they are **meant** to be—helping them become what they were **created** to be. Let God use your eyes to **see** others, because it is in your vision of their **potential** that you help bring about a transformation that is **beyond anything** they can see when they first begin their journeys with you.

Counseling Tip #1: See in others what they **can** be, and you help them become what they are **capable** of being.¹

2nd Ears: Some of you are the **ears** of Christ, listening in measured silence, not only to **what** is said, but also to **how** is it said. In other words, you listen to the **music** as well as the **lyrics** of the song; you listen not only to what is **said**, but also to what is **not** said. And in doing so, you help others hear what is **in between** the lines—helping them hear what they do not hear **themselves** saying. Let God use your ears to **listen** to others, because it is in your listening to the sacred space of **silence** that healing occurs.²

Counseling Tip #2: Remember that most people will not care how much you **know** so

much as they will know how much you **care**.

3rd Mouth: Some of you are the **mouth** of Christ, speaking not only the **right word** at the **right time** with the **right balance** of mercy and justice, but also knowing when **not** to speak. In other words, you know when to say **something**; you know when to say **nothing**. And in doing so, you help others hear the hidden voice that resides **within**—**helping** them learn not only what they may be doing **wrong**, but—more importantly—what they are doing **right**. Let God use your words to **touch** others, because it is in the compassionate, caring reflection that **healing** occurs.

Counseling Tip #3: When you don't know what to say, count to 100. When you **do** know what to say, count to **1,000**. Anonymous

Some of you are worried that I might get off on a tangent, so I'll go ahead do that now because this will be the last time I get to be your teacher and it's only time I will ever get to stand at a pulpit in a great church like this one.

Scientific Empiricism and Divine Intervention. I encourage you to base your treatment plans on scientific empiricism and evidenced-based **principles**. At the same time, I encourage you to envision **goals** that are attainable only through **Divine intervention**. Expect **miracles**---because you will get to be **witnesses** to transformations that are beyond what others expect for themselves at the time of their first meeting with you. Miracles rarely happen **instantaneously**; they usually take **time**---and time is God's way of keeping everything from happening at once.³

Yes, that last statement is often attributed to Albert Einstein, although the quote is actually taken from science fiction writer Ray Cummings, who wrote the 1921 novel, *The Time Professor*. Albert Einstein **did** say, however, that the significant problems we face cannot be solved by the same type of thinking that created them.⁴ **I** say to you: Change your **thinking** and you change your **life**: As I see it, your thoughts

become actions, your actions become habits, your habits become your character, and your character becomes your destiny. In other words, change your **thinking** and you change your **destiny**.

Counseling Tip #4: Don't try to change **others**; strive to change **yourself**. Don't try to **change** others; strive to **accept** them—and they will **become** changed.

You are not only **professional** counselors; you are the **state of the art** in professional counseling. You are not only **Christian** counselors; you are the **standard of excellence** in Christian counseling. You have earned Masters' degrees in **both** counseling psychology **and** Christian theology---integrating the sacred and the secular. You have learned your books and theories well, and now it is time to put them aside when you touch the miracle of living souls (Carl Jung, 1953, p. 4).⁵ **I'm not talking about that book stuff**. I'm talking about seeing the face of Christ in others.

Counseling Tip #4: Remember, "Whatever you do for the least of your brothers or sisters, you do for your Master" (Matthew 25: 40).⁶

In the real world of 2012, these would be the poor **and** rich who are the poor in spirit---the hungry **and** the well-fed who are starving to be loved---the imprisoned **and** the free who are shackled by secrets of shame---the sick **and** the strong who suffer from disorders of the soul. **These** are the ones you are called to serve. These are the ones you are called to **love**.

"The beginning of love," says Thomas Merton, "is to let those we love be **perfectly themselves**, and not twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise, we love only the **reflection** of ourselves that we see in them."⁸

III. Finally, in response to your third request, I'd like to tell you what I really think of you. [Pause] Don't worry; it's going to get worse.

In my final charge to you, **professional counselors**, I have found you to be fully charged, completely electrifying, powerful transformers of human lives—including mine. In my final charge to you, **Christian counselors**, I encourage you to **see** the face of Jesus in those you serve; I encourage you to **be** the face of Christ to those you serve. In other words, I challenge you to be who you **already are**:

1st You are *visionaries*. You are the **eyes** of Christ, as you see in your clients the **unlimited potential** that they do not see in themselves.

2nd You are *witnesses*. You are the **ears** of Christ, as your clients' confessions of themselves as broken beings are transformed beyond any vision they can imagine when they first begin their journeys with you.

3rd You are *role models*. You are the **mouth** of Christ, not a critical frown, but a loving smile—nurturing, supporting, and encouraging the transformation of others into whom they were **created** to be.

Finally---and most importantly---I challenge you to let others **experience** with you the transformation that **I** have experienced with you. Let others **see** in you what **I** have seen in you—the **Face of Christ**—a window through which others can gain a glimpse of the reflection God.

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Ethics Professor
May 5, 2012

Note to the Reader: The bolded text shows words or phrases that were spoken with more emphasis during the address.

Notes

1. Original text: “Wenn wir Mann behandeln, während er ist, bilden wir ihn schlechter, als er ist. Aber, wenn wir einen Mann behandeln, wie er sein soll, lassen wir ihn werden, was er zum Sein fähig ist [Transliteration: “When we treat a man as he is, we make him worse than he is. But when we treat a man as he ought to be, we make him become what he is capable of being.”] Modern translation: “Treat others as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)
2. Plouffe, Mary (Clinical Psychologist in South Freeport, Maine). (2011). In silence there is healing. This I believe: A public dialogue about belief—one essay at a time. *The Bob Edwards Show*. April 8, 2011. Retrieved from <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/28381/>
3. Although often attributable to Albert Einstein, the quote is actually from Raymond King Cummings, a science fiction writer who in 1922 wrote “Time... is what keeps everything from happening at once.” Cummings, R. K. (1922). *The Girl in the Golden Atom*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press. Page. 46. Cummings repeated this sentence in several of his novellas. Some sources attribute the quote to his earlier work, *The Time Professor*, in 1921.
4. “The significant problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.” Albert Einstein
5. “Learn your books and theories well, but put them put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul.” This statement is a paraphrase of the original quote from Jung, Carl G. (1953). *Psychological Reflections*. New York: Pantheon Books. Page 4. “Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your own creative individuality alone must decide.”
6. Matthew 25: 31-40 (NIV): ³¹ When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” ³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” ⁴⁰ The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”
7. Isaiah 9:6 (NIV): “For unto as a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”
8. Merton, T. (1955). *No man is an island*. London: Hollis & Carter. “The beginning of this love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them. Can this be charity?” Page 168.
Merton, T. (2003). *No man is an island*. Barnes & Noble, Inc., by arrangement with Harcourt, Inc.
Merton’s original book was originally published 1955. Copyright 1955 by The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani [sic]. Copyright renewed 1983 by The Trustees of Merton Legacy Trust. In this 2003 version of the book, the quoted material is from the bottom of page 168 in Chapter 9 (p. 164–187), which is titled “The Measure of Charity.”

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