

“God Is Closer Than You Think—The People”

One of the most popular kinds of books or articles in our day is the kind that offer a diagnostic checklist to tell you if you fit into certain categories. You can check a few boxes and find out, for example, if you're in good health, or if you're financially stable or teetering on the brink of disaster, or if you're being a good parent. It seems there are checklists for everything in the world, including a book called *How to Know If You're a Redneck!* Since that passé, how about a twist. How about, You Might Be a Redneck Jedi...In case you've been wondering about that, I'll give you a few indicators to help clarify that for you.

You might be a redneck Jedi if...

1. You ever used the phrase, "May the force be with y'all."
2. Your Jedi robe is a camouflage color.
3. At least one wing of your X-Wings is primer colored.
4. You have bantha horns on the front of your land speeder.
5. You can easily describe the taste of an Ewok.
6. You ever lost a hand during a light saber fight because you had to spit.
7. Wookies are offended by your B.O.
8. You have ever used the force in conjunction with fishing/bowling.
9. Your father has ever said to you, "Shoot, son come on over to the dark side...it'll be a hoot."
10. You have ever had your R-2 unit use its self-defense electro-shock thingy to get the barbecue grill to light.
11. Although you had to kill him, you kinda thought that Jabba the Hutt had a pretty good handle on how to treat his women.

Today I want us to do a little diagnostic of ourselves to get a read on how well we see God, and get close to God, in other people. So get out your outline and pen and get ready.

These past few weeks we have been doing an intensive study and application to discover that God is truly closer than we think.

- We've talked about *his* desire to be close to us—to be *with us*.
- We covered how being with him is our *choice*.
- The third week we learned how the Spirit of God is *present within* us as Christ-followers.
- Last week we learned about listening to God's *voice* throughout each day.

Every one of these weeks builds on the other, and each reflects God's great desire for a relationship with you that is far more than a Sunday-morning experience. An experience that's woven into the fabric of every single day. One of the most overlooked places to experience God's presence is in the lives of the people around us.

Here's the diagnostic question we're going to ask ourselves today: "How do you know if you are seeing God's presence in and through the people around you?" Here's why this is important: when you and I grow in our awareness of God's presence in and through the people around us, we are growing in our love for people and our love for God—and growing even more aware of his presence.

So today I want to talk about three ways you can see God's closeness in people around you. First, **[SLIDE...] If you see the people of the church as God's living presence on earth, you might be seeing**

God through the people around you. One of the primary places we should look for and see God is in other Christ-followers in our church family. Jesus said, [SLIDE...] **“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20, KJV).** But let’s face it, this isn’t as easy as it sounds. Because sometimes, it’s the people in our families, biological and spiritual, that we like to pick on most. Sometimes it’s the people in our spiritual family that we see their flaws more than their strengths, more than what God is doing through them. C. S. Lewis talked about how easy it is to not see God in other Christians because when we sit next to them in church we can get caught up in outward things like when they sing out of tune, have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, or strange smells. One of the constant challenges of being brothers and sisters in Christ is to push ourselves to see beyond all that external stuff to see God in them.

But what does God look like in other Christ-followers? Well, **when we see Christians encourage one another**, we’re seeing God. For example, there are a number of people in our church that have had severe back problems and unbelievable spinal surgeries. I have seen God work as one person who has gone through this encourages another. One woman in the church, Gail Blue, faced a very, very difficult, and life-changing back surgery. It was terrifying to her, but if she didn’t have the surgery the option was unthinkable damage to her spinal cord. One other person in the church, Jeff Shore, had undergone a very similar surgery and happened to be a doctor himself. He was able to give her such a breath of hope and encouragement, not as a doctor, but as a Christian who had been there. His encouragement made all the difference. And now she is encouraging another person in our church who is facing serious spinal issues.

Teddy Steen is also a picture of encouragement. As someone who has experienced what it’s like to face drug and alcohol addiction and come out the other side alive. Her life mission is to help others that are in the midst of addiction. She and Robby Boyd have a recovery group that meets every week and I see the difference they are making in helping people face addictions. And not only that, Teddy wants to help whole families. Listen to this, there are 5 families that I know of, where parents are overwhelmed with grief because one of their children is caught up in drug use. Teddy never hesitates to sit down and talk with those moms and dads to encourage them, teach them, cry with them, be there for them.

I think of Becky Burress and Shelia Prather. When their friend Stephanie Stephens died, they willingly stepped in to help her son Andy in any way. Encouraging him, guiding him, being a resource for him. Scripture says, [SLIDE...] **“No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:12, NIV).**

We also see God in the church family **when Christ-followers forgive each other** and work through the tough stuff of doing life together. When one disappoints another and we don’t give up, or jump ship, or trash that person. The apostle Paul was hurt and disappointed by a young man named Mark. He wounded Paul deeply and they had to part ways for short time. But with the help another Christ-follower named Barnabas, Paul was able to extend forgiveness and restoration to Mark, and they continued in ministry together after that. In fact, this Mark who disappointed Paul, has his name on one of the Gospels in our New Testament. The last series we did was on forgiveness, God forgives us and commands us to forgive each other, and when we do we see God in the lives of other people.

When you see Christ-followers **sharing with each other**, you are seeing God. When you give to each other to help make ends meet, to help ease grief, to get through a rough patch...you see God. Recently two of our dentists have helped people with dental needs in our church, a third is hoping to go to Nicaragua and help people there. Several years ago a family bought plane tickets for me and the two sons of a church member who was undergoing cancer treatment in Texas. That was the last time those boys saw their father alive. We see God when we see that generosity.

We see God in the church family when we see **Christ-followers confront each other in love.** When one Christian, lovingly, gently, humbly lets another know that they see them heading in a dangerous direction relationally, or professionally, or morally. And it helps them make a course-correction that saves them from tons of pain and heartache. We see God with us.

Jesus said, [SLIDE...] **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35, NIV).** When we look beyond the little things that may annoy us about our brothers and sisters in Christ, we begin to see God in them and at work through them.

Let's look at another way to see God's closeness in people around you. [SLIDE...] **If you see people not for their earthly status but for their stature in Christ, you might be seeing God through the people around you.**

A writer named Denis Waitley writes about an exercise that he sometimes includes in his public speaking. He asks eight volunteers from the audience to come upfront, and then he puts a cardboard sign around each of their necks. On the sign is written a title to indicate their status in life: baby, mother, astronaut, janitor, rock star, NBA basketball player, doctor, lawyer. Then they are told to position themselves in order of their importance.

Now let me add that these volunteers are kids ages seven to eleven. What starts out as a harmless exercise turns into a *Survivor* episode. After the pushing and shoving stops, they settle down to serious status seeking about who should be at the front of the line. The astronaut heads to the front—"I am first because I am going places the rest of you can't go. Besides, I am going to try to find us another place to live because the earth is too crowded." Applause.

The rock star walks up and pushes the astronaut to second place, to a round of cheers from the spectators. The rock star says, "I'm already in outer space. I make the most money, and I could buy you as a pilot for my private jet."

Next comes the NBA player. "I think that I should be first. I make as much money as the rock star and play to a big crowd every night all season doing something physical, which is better for you." More cheers.

The doctor walks up to make his case. "I should be first because I fix all of you when you are injured or sick, and I make good money." Light applause.

The lawyer takes a try. "I'm the best because I can put you in jail or keep you out of jail, and you have to pay all of your money to me." Big cheers.

Up walks the mother. "I really am first because I brought all of you into the world." Again, just light applause.

The baby comes next. "Shouldn't I really be first in line? All of us were babies before we were mothers or anything else." Nods and cheers.

Do you know who never even tries to make it to the front of the line? The janitor. Those who play the janitor role don't even try for first because they know they will be laughed at if they do, even though it's just a game.

That's the way the game of life goes in this world. There is pushing and shoving to see who is going to win, who is number one, who is most important, who is most powerful or most successful. People go through their lives being miserable because there always seems to be someone ahead of them, and it eats away at them. If you are a person who can see people not for their earthly status, but for their stature in Christ, you are more likely to see the nearness of God through the people around you.

In particular this means seeing those in need. Seeing those in need is a way to see God. Mother Teresa said that the poor are Jesus in his "distressing disguise." One writer put it this way, [SLIDE...] **"Jesus frequently chose the humble, poor, rejected, and despised. They are often the preferred dwelling place of God—in them, we may meet God" (Suzanne Farnham).**

Opening our eyes to the poor, opening our hearts, our hands, is truly a way to see God and be close to him. So have you chosen to see the poor, the rejected, the despised lately? Have you opened your eyes to the world beyond your safe comfortable little corner? Is your heart growing because of what you see? Get real honest with yourself. Are you more compassionate now than you were five years ago?

There are lots of ways to open your eyes to the marginalized. It just takes 30 minutes. I want to challenge you to take thirty minutes. Because in thirty minutes there are lots of ways to begin seeing. Visit one of our local nursing homes and just sit in the lunch room for half an hour; go down to Souls Harbor and just

watch the people for 30 minutes; go to Crosslines and just watch the people who walk through their doors; walk with a friend down one of the streets here in Joplin where the poor live. Make a visit to Watered Gardens and just watch. Go down to Salvation Army some afternoon. Try one of these things. Open your eyes...and then open your ears and find out if you don't hear a voice saying, "This changes everything doesn't it? Because now you have seen it. Because now you have seen Jesus in his distressing disguise."

When I was in Nicaragua in April, I saw God everywhere. In the poorest of the poor on this earth. In those who have given their lives to serving them. We're preparing for two trips to Nicaragua next year, maybe that is one way for you to see God.

At Hearts and Hammers last Saturday, I got to hear some of your stories as you worked on the homes of people who could not help themselves. Many of you spent time with the people you were working for. You met them, talked to them, heard their stories. You came face to face with God.

I ran into Nancy Hoagland on Thursday. She and some other people are serving lunch at Watered Gardens next week. I was there last week. They will see God in the people they are serving.

I can't help but think about Jesus' parable about the sheep and the goats. The King thanks one group of people and condemns another group, based on whether or not they gave him food when he was hungry, something to drink when he was thirsty, clothes when he was ragged, and so on. In both cases the people reply, "When did we ever see you in that condition?" The King says, "Whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." God is closer than you think.

Finally, Let's look at another way to see God's closeness in people around you. **[SLIDE...] If you see strangers as people who contain the image of God, you might be seeing God through the people around you.**

Strangers. God is there in people you do not know, yet encounter all the time. We are so driven by time, hurry, checking off our to-do lists, that sometimes we completely forget that those strangers that intersect our lives in a continuous flow, we can meet God in them. You know who I'm talking about. The clerk at the convenience store that you blow through now and then. The checker at the grocery store. The person you're standing next to waiting to get your license renewed. The person sitting next to you on the plane. In any line, in any encounter, God is there in the strangers.

Frank Laubach wrote about a way to continually experience God in interactions with people through what he calls the "CIHU" prayer. It stands for "Can I help you?" Laubach wrote this: **[SLIDE...] "One speaks to God and man at the same moment asking, 'Can I help you get together?' We do not ask, 'Do I like you' or 'Do I need you' or 'Do I despise you' but only 'Can I help you' and 'Can I help you find God.'"**

A few months before Zoe was born Janet and I flew down to Florida for vacation. Our flights got horribly delayed and so our connecting flight into Fort Meyers was very late. On that flight we sat next to a stranger, a woman, who struck up a conversation with us. She asked about the upcoming birth. Even prayed for the baby. She was from the Fort Meyers area and suggested all kinds of places to go and restaurants to eat at. She was a Christian and we talked about our faith. She realized how late we were getting in and was worried that our rental car place would be closed. Her husband was picking her up and she offered to give us a ride to the rental place. She said that if it was closed they'd be more than happy to drive us to our final destination that night. It was at least a 30 minute drive. God was certainly there in her.

On my flight back from Nicaragua to Dallas I sat next to a young man who'd been traveling the world. He was a surfer and skate boarder. We chatted off and on for the 2 or 3 hour flight. I gently shared my faith. He didn't have a faith Christ, but he had lots of questions. He taught me some things about traveling light, literally and figuratively. I met God in him that day. The God he didn't even really know by name yet.

I want to move through life, looking for God in strangers. I want to move through life praying for each person I meet, "Can I help you?" Looking into each person's eyes and seeing God in them.

Your assignment and mine for tomorrow and all the tomorrows after is to look and listen for God in each person we see. When you run into a difficult person, hear Jesus saying, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." When you run into a needy person, hear Jesus saying, "Whatever you did for one

of the least of these...” When you see someone you love, allow God to love you through them. When someone confronts you, ask God if maybe he’s speaking to you through them. When you see a stranger, remember the CIHU prayer. When you see another believer, hear Jesus saying, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I...”

I want to show you some containers and I want you to tell me what they were meant to contain...cup holder, CD case, cat carrier, violin case...**[THEN AARON CALLS A PERSON UP ON THE STAGE]** Take a good look at the shape of this container. Do you know what this was meant to contain? He/She was meant to contain God.

You see, of all creation, only people carry the image of God. Jesus said that he will make his home in us. You were made to be a God-bearer. And every human being that you will ever see was created in the image of God. So people have the capacity to be the carriers of his presence like nothing else. We’re to look at other people with a kind of awe and reverence. God is closer than you think. Be intentional about seeing him the people around you. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Sr. Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church and author, for his resources for this message.