

“The Sign of Understanding” (Luke 22:54-62)

The Third Wednesday of Lent, the 13th of the 40 Days

March 4th, 2015

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ whose passion and crucifixion for our sins has saved us from death and condemnation and saved us to eternal life and entrance into the Kingdom of God. Amen. The looks we see that people give us. What do they mean? That of course depends on the looks. Looks, stares, glares, glances, they communicate though, don't they? They sure do! When I conduct pre-marital and marital pastoral counseling, we go through an entire session that can sometimes be stretched into two or even three sessions on communication and part and parcel of communication are those very human and very communicative gestures. We might use words to say that everything is fine, but if our “looks” are not in alignment with the claim, then we really are communicating something entirely different so that – in some cases – “everything is fine” *means* “everything is most certainly *not* fine!”

People talk about looks. “If looks could kill.” Well, that person must be very angry at you. “She had daggers for you.” There you are again: she's not very happy with you. Looks can go the other way of course. Traci gave me looks in college...though I was still somewhat mystified. Was she just being friendly or was it an invitation to ask her out on a date? She still gives me looks, but I'm a little better now at interpreting them. For example, there is the look for not discussing something in front of the kids; there is the look “you didn't notice?!” which is similar to the look “you forgot?!”; there is the – “what am I going to do with you?” look; one of my most dreaded looks is the “oh so you want to go *there*” look (then I know I'm in trouble); and of course the “you really *are* the greatest guy on the planet,” look. That's my favorite one! Of course, I could be misreading that look, but I'm sticking to my current interpretation! Looks tell stories, they really do.

I've experienced this in the pastoral ministry. You can't fake your way through the ministry. I mean you could try and you might get away with it for a little while I suppose, but you either care or you don't care. In the pastoral ministry, people need to know that you care. Men are problem solvers. They want to jump to the practical solution in any given situation. But human beings aren't that simple. People need to talk and they need to vent; they need to “be” in the state they're in and they need people to care for them along the way, sometimes just to “be there;” oftentimes just to listen...just to be compassionate (not to necessarily come up with a plan or solution, but to “be present” and to demonstrate that the person in front of you is important to you and important to God). To back this up is the “look” of compassion and the willingness to bear one another's burdens. That's a look that says, “I care.” Pastors can't be pastors without that one.

But there have been occasions for other looks. In one instance many years ago there was a terrible controversy that erupted. I had parishioners who were offended by one of my staff and they decided to go on the offensive. Their disruption was being expressed on a Sunday morning. Resentment and hatred had claimed a swagger in public view. I witnessed a demonstration of this in the reception line and all I had to “say” to my parishioner was a look. The look was *“Really?! How inappropriate! How shocking to see in God’s house!”* I’ll never forget that moment in time, because this Christian knew what the look meant and they *instantaneously* stopped the behavior. I didn’t have to say a word. My dad had taught me that, there were looks he gave that led to instantaneous adjustments in behavior and he didn’t have to say a word.

On one cold night in Jerusalem about 2000 years ago, there was a look given by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to St. Peter. Jesus did not say a word. All he did was look at Peter. All Peter did was see the Lord’s face; the Lord’s eyes. Not a word. Just a look and God’s work would be done. His powerful work through His powerful Word...and yet not a word had been uttered. Just a look. The Word Incarnate gave a look and history changed. What was that look exactly? We wonder. But the Scriptures say, ***“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.”*** (Luke 22:61-62)

All that from just a look. Whatever that look was it caused Peter to go through what he went through. He saw his sin and he wept bitterly. Such a reaction might lead us to assume that our Lord looked at Him with condemnation, but we should be careful with that deduction because that would contradict Who our Savior was and Who our Savior is. “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.” (John 3:17 isn’t quite as popular as John 3:16, but it’s a priceless Scripture that reminds us that our Lord did not come to condemn). It was not a look to show anger as in “How dare you, you traitor!” And it was not a look to condemn with “I told you so, you sinner!” Over and over again when the Lord had taught He would exclaim, “O you of little faith,” and this reaction of our Lord is often misread. He did not say this to knock His disciples over the head. It wasn’t a chastisement: “You stupid followers!” No! These were words of endearment. He sees how we struggle. We believe and yet our unbelief follows us wherever we go! Jesus understands this Christian. He knows. And surely this reality of unconditional love and understanding must have filled the eyes of our Lord as He looked at Peter. Peter was not taken to condemnation, but with clarity of mind this look from our Savior took Peter back to the Word of the Lord and when this happened, the Word did it’s work: and you know that work: sometimes it needs to convict; and sometimes it needs to comfort; sometimes it needs to reveal sin; and sometimes it needs to reveal our Savior. For Peter – in this moment and in the greatest love – it was given to convict. And the conviction led to the realization of his sin and “he went out and wept bitterly.” But remember Christian: the Lord convicts His people for one reason and that is to prepare them for repentance which is another way of saying that He convicts His people so that they would receive forgiveness and renewal. That is to say we know more about this look – when

our Lord was being taken away to be crucified – it was a look that began the process for Peter to be restored even after He had denied the Savior. It was a look that would lead Peter to forgiveness and wholeness. That's the look that Jesus gave! But how can we be so sure? How dare we make such an assertion about a look! A mere look! What gives us such confidence? Because the look was backed up by a sign: we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that when Jesus went to the cross, that He also went for St. Peter. In the cross was the sign of understanding: "my dear people struggle; they sin; they do the evil that they do not want to do; they do not do the good that they want to do; and my Peter denied me – I knew He would; I told him he would – but I still love him and I'm going to die for him so that his sins (like your sins dear Christians) would be wiped away by my blood." Again, how can we know this intention? How can we be so certain of this sign of understanding? Because when our Lord arose He backed up His original look through Peter's restoration: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" and "Feed my lambs." (John 21:15); "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" and "Tend my sheep." (John 21:16); and finally – for the third time to match the three denials; three absolutions for three sins; three restorations and calls for three abandonments and turning aways; three proofs that the Lord's understanding is stronger than our insanity; that His restoration is stronger than our fall – "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" followed by "Feed my sheep." (John 21:17). Peter would be restored...and Jesus knew this from the moment of that look on the day Peter denied Him.

"There is an old tradition in the Christian Church that this story has a very happy ending. It may be true, or it may be completely legendary, but it is singularly significant, with a certain justice and poetic fitness. It reports that on July 19, in the year of our Lord 64...a fire broke out in Rome. Half the city was destroyed. The Emperor Nero needed a scapegoat, and the Christians were at hand. According to the legend hundreds died by fire and the sword. Among them, according to the legend, was also Peter. At his own request he was crucified head downward because he did not consider himself worthy of dying in the same manner as his Lord had died. Here, then, the story ends. On a hot July morning an old man is hanging upside down in a Roman arena. If he opened his eyes, he saw the bloody red sand from which the church would grow in the years to come. But if he closed them, as I am sure he did – if he closed them in the moment of awareness and remembering of all the years that always comes to dying men – he saw something else. He saw many things in his own life, but surely above all, the dawn when he had looked into two eyes that understood him and loved him forever. He remembered the power that drove him out into the night to come at long last to this ridiculous position with the world upside down and tears of pain in his eyes once again. But now there was something else! He was waiting now for the moment when his Lord would come again to tell him that he had done well since that night, so well indeed that now the angels were waiting for him. He had kept the faith. And he knew, as he knew also that dawn by the lake [when he was restored three times], that now there would be no more night and no more tears. He was, I am sure, very content and very happy." (O.P. Kretzmann, *The Sign of the Cross*, St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959. 26-27) The Lord understood him. And the sign of the cross means that

He understands you too Christian so that you are also led to what matters most, the forgiveness of your sins through the Lord's cross of understanding. In Jesus' Name.