Sunday, January 29, 1977
SEE HER AS THE CHILD SHE WAS
Matthew 13:53-58

At times, all of us have trouble in seeing the authentic human being in another person. Either we make the mistake the townspeople of Nazareth made in the story just read from the Gospel of Matthew: they were not living to see Jesus in any other way than they had known him before he began his teaching and preaching. Or we make the mistake of only seeing the outer shell of a person, make a quick judgment and don't look any deeper.

When Jesus returned to his hometown to teach and preach as he had been doing in other places, the people were not ready to accept him. "Where did he get this wisdom," they asked. They did not deny that he had wisdom but were not willing to accept it either. "We knew him before he began teaching. We watched him grow up. He was nothing special then." They had formed an opinion of Jesus and were not willing to change it, no matter what new evidence there might be. It's like the people who say, "I know what I believe, so don't confuse me with the facts."

Such prejudices as the people of Nazareth had are never reasonable. There's a story about a man who ask a wealthier friend for a loan of one hundred dollars. "Can't do it," said the friend, "because my mother-in-law is visiting us right now." The man wanting the money was puzzled, "What has your mother-in-law visiting you got to do with lending me the money, he asked. "Nothing at all," replied his friend, "but when you don't want to do something, one excuse is as good as another."

The same principle applies to our prejudices in relation to how we see people. Sometime ago I heard someone listing the reasons he didn't care for persons of another race. He said, "They are shiftless, they lack ambition, they won't accept responsibility, they commit many crimes, they don't even help one another, and they are just unintelligent."

This same person, however, doesn't care much for Jews either. And what do you suppose his "reasons" are? The Jews are too ambitious, they stick together and help each other too much. They are too clever and study too hard and get best grades and run the big businesses and the most prosperous law offices and the most flourishing medical practices.

The very opposite traits that prejudice him against one group of people, prejudice him against the other. Most of the things he believes about these two groups of people are false and maybe some of them are true. But what is significant is that if you don't want to like and accept someone, one excuse is as good as another, and you'll find an excuse. The objective facts don't matter, and the reasons are never as reasonable as we like to think they are.

One way to overcome such unreasonable opinions about persons is to remember to take a fresh look each time. People change. George Bernard Shaw, the English writer once said, "The only man who behaves sensibly is my tailor: he takes my measurements anew every time he sees me, while all the rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them."

That's exactly what the townspeople of Nazareth were doing — they were not taking any new measurements of Jesus. They were measuring him by their previous opinions of him. They were unwilling to take a fresh look at him.

But we shouldn't be too harsh on the people of Nazareth. It still happens. Recently I was talking with a young woman who had spent three years in a mental hospital. Even though this had been some years back, she said that she rarely tells anyone about this part of her life, because when she does, people tend to see her differently. They do not see her as she now is.

Many persons who have spent time in prison face the same problem upon release. Even though they have served their time and are really trying to be new people, society as a whole and many of us as individuals do not take a new measurement.

But as Christians, we are to be the kind of people who do our best to see others as they are, not as what we think they are.

Another part of the problem for us today is that the culture in which we live puts so much emphasis on packaging, the surface appearance, the clothes, the manners, that we sometimes do not see beneath the surface when we are dealing with other human beings. One observer put it this way: "The personality of a person is not like an apple that has to be polished, but like a banana that has to be peeled, and the reasons we sometimes remain so far from one another; the reason we neither communicate nor interact in any real way, is that most of us spend our lives in polishing rather than peeling."

Often the outer shell of a person is like a peeling, something built up to protect the inner self from further bruises and injury. The outer shell is not the real person, but sometimes (if the fear of injury remains too great) it becomes a lifelong substitute for the person. We all wear some kind of body armor for protection.

As we meet other people we need to remember to try to see through this peeling or body armor to the real person underneath. And in understanding ourselves, we need to remember that the authentic personality is the person who knows that he or she is like a banana and that in meeting other people, we need to put aside our own peelings, or our own armor so that we can reach out openly to others, and they to us. Only when we are detached from our defensive armor can we make a true response to others and they to us.

Most of us, however, think in terms of the apple, not the banana. We spend our time in shining the surface, in making it rosy, gleaming, in protecting the image. But the image is not the apple which may be wormy and rotten to the core.

Part of what made Jesus Christ so remarkable was his ability to see right through the surface of a person to the inner core. And he never let the surface detract him from meeting and getting to know the individual as he or she was. Jesus could see the hurt beneath the surface as well as the health.

For us, seeing the hurt inside a person is often more difficult.

The other day I read about a man who had slipped off a ladder and fractured a small bone in one foot. Thus, he had to wear a little cast and had to use a cane.

He said what was pleasant about this otherwise painful experience was the way in which he was treated by everyone — strangers included. People opened doors for him, helped him into his car, and gave him lots of room in elevators. Yet, a few weeks later when the cast was off and the cane no longer needed, people reverted to their old selfish selves, pushing and shoving without regard.

The man said it occurred to him that everyone has some sort of broken bone somewhere, even if it cannot be seen. Not physical bones, but emotional hurts or breaks that are just as tender and painful as the visible bone that was taped and labeled. Most of us carry with us some ancient wound that has not completely healed, but often because it is inside us, it cannot be seen.

We protect these wounds or hurts not with tape or crutch but with mannerisms and defensive reactions that make us, or others seem less likable or less approachable than we really are. So again. we have to work at seeing beneath the surface, behind the defensive reactions.

The problem is that we are creatures of the visible. If something cannot be seen or felt, we imagine it does not exist. Maybe what we need to do from time to time, for one day at least, is treat every person we meet as if his or her foot were bandaged. That a difference that would make.

Now one more point on this theme. The people of Nazareth had trouble accepting Jesus as he was, because they thought of him as he used to be, they did not take a new measurement.

There are also times when it is helpful to see a person as the child he or she was. This little technique can help us get through the outer armor or the surface appearance. See her as the child she was or see him as the child he was! By doing this we can rise above the pettiness, the spite, the cruelty, the arrogance of another person and it can help us get over our own blindness as well.

Try it! Particularly when you see a person who shows unattractive traits or who is offensive to you for whatever reason. In your imagination, see that person as the child he or she was. Try even to picture that person as a tiny baby. Remember the day she began her life. Then see her as a smiling happy baby or young child. See her being cuddled and loved by her parents. See her desiring to give love and take love.

Also, remember that often times different experiences in life while we are children, affect us. Sometimes they affect us and others without our being aware of it at the time. As children, people have experiences which turn trust into suspicion, warmth into coldness, the give and take into all take and no give.

See the person as the child she was. Behind the porn or rudeness, beneath the crust of meanness or coldness that a person is now as an adult, begin to see the wistful little girl or boy who is hurt or disappointed and determined to strike back at the world. Or see the little girl who is frightened and tightens her jaw and puts up her hands to ward off some overwhelming fear that hovers deep in the dark past. See her as the child she was!

Or see the little child who was given too much too soon--and given things instead of feelings — and now can only clutch her power or her purse the way she used to clutch her doll or teddy bear because there is nothing else she feels is really hers for keeps. See her as the child she was!

As you walk down the streets of Lincoln, or some other town or city, as you meet people, people you don’t know and those you do know; those who seem to be at their wit’s end, as well as those who seem haughty or overly proud, look beyond these traits and characteristics and try to imagine that person as a small baby or a little child. And perhaps she was the child who

ate too much because she craved the sweetness of affection, or the child who drank too much because she could not face a motherless world, or the child who bragged and lied and cheated to try to get revenge for some indignity that was gnawing at her insides.

I think Jesus Christ must've often seen people as the children they were, particularly those people he met who were hurting. He could see beneath the surface. He could see back into their lives. He could also see the child-like spirit that needed to be reawakened so that love and trust could once again be a part of that person's life.

As Christians we are called not only to see persons as the children they were, but also to see all people as God's children and therefore our brothers and sisters. Amen.