

***Triggers – John 21:1-14***

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The more we use cell phones (and don't most of us use cell phones more than we like to admit?), the more we tie certain sounds they make to people or events.

When I am with my parents, the sound on their phone that indicates they have received a message is so distinct that I know it's their phone and not mine. And in the very rare moment when I hear that tone and it's not from their cell phone, I think of them.

When you have your phone silenced (and I'm sure all of you have your phones silenced right now), the sound of an incoming text message can still be heard in the vibration the phone makes. And there are even distinctions between the lengths of the vibrations to let you know whether it's a text message you're getting or simply an alert to something that's happening.

Like the ringtones or alerts of a phone, there are many sounds, smells, and pictures that trigger memories or an awareness of a person or event taking place.

The smell of coffee brewing or bacon cooking would awaken me from sleep when I was a kid and tell me that morning had arrived.

The sight of cars at a dead stop on the interstate a few hundred yards in front of us trigger the recognition of an accident that has occurred and that arrival at our destination will be delayed.

The distinct sound my twenty-year-old cat makes lets me know he's about to lose his lunch and that a clean-up on aisle 9 is coming.

Or the sight of a young person graduating or getting married takes us back to the days when our own kids got their diplomas or walked down the aisle.

When these things happen, we can't help but recognize our surroundings or be taken back into our memories.

The seasons of the year certainly serve as triggers, too. The first sight of green in our yards triggers spring's approach. The first start of the air conditioner triggers the warmth of summer, the first turning of the leaves triggers the crispness of autumn, and the first frost on the ground triggers the coming of winter.

For people of faith, the turning of the church calendar, too, makes us aware of the significant events that have shaped us.

I'll never forget that when Joey was five years old, he and I were sitting at the kitchen table early in the morning on the Saturday before Easter mapping out the day in front of us. I had agreed to take him to a movie later in the day, which he was excited about (Jacob had something else going on that day). But before that, I said, we have to go to the church for what they called the Easter Egg-stravaganza.

"Oohh," he said. "What will we do there?"

"Well, there will be an inflatable bounce house." And his eyes lit up.

"And there's going to be a piñata for the kids to hit." And his eyes got a little bigger.

"And," I said, "there's going to be an Easter egg hunt."

And Joey's eyes got even bigger and suddenly he shouted, "Christ is risen!"

For this five-year-old preacher's kid, it was the search for plastic eggs with chocolate inside that triggered recognition of the risen Christ.

The text from John 21 today contains moments of recognition—moments when these ordinary people, based on something they saw happen, triggered clear awareness of Christ's presence.

On two different occasions, a fascinating event occurred that, based on the disciples' knowledge of who could've been responsible, signaled a resounding affirmation of God's nearness.

The disciples, struggling to find the right place on the water where the nets would garner a catch, succumb to the instructions of a

guy standing on the shore who redirects their nets to other side of the boat. And when these nets come up this time, they are full of fish.

That seemingly rich harvest is the unmistakable work of Jesus, so says one of the disciples.

When they had all come ashore, they found a fire going with fish cooking on it and some bread. The disciples are invited by the host to sit and have breakfast. And upon hearing that invitation, the disciples didn't have to bother to ask who he was. His invitation to them to share in the bountiful meal was all the proof they needed of Jesus' presence.

In both these encounters, Jesus' identity was triggered not by self-identifying words but by the gifts he brought them--gifts that were relevant to their own lives at that distinctive moment: fish to make a living and breakfast to feed their hungry stomachs.

In the sea of Tiberius, if anybody was going to know where the fish were, it should have been the disciples. Fishing there was their livelihood. So when the guy standing on the shore tells them to throw the nets on the other side of the boat and they find a bonanza, it could have only meant one thing.

And when they are later offered breakfast on the shore, this host's invitation to them to share in the meal he had provided instantly revealed who he was. "Come and eat," he said to them. They had heard those words before.

They recognized the risen Christ because he revealed himself in ways that were unique to them and left them no doubt.

There are moments in our own lives when we have little doubt that Christ is near. And those moments come in the people we meet or the places we visit—people and places that are unique to the joys we find and the challenges we face.

I would imagine that for those of you who worship in this space on a regular basis, simply entering this sanctuary (or these beautiful church grounds) triggers the presence of a God who is vast, mighty, and victorious. This space would seem to leave no doubt about that. It's an awe-inspiring space.

By the same token, we also experience triggers that reveal God's intimacy and personal love for us: the child or grandchild who tells us they love us; the text or phone message from a kid we've mentored — who betrayed our trust at one point but who now expresses in his long message how much he needs us in his life and wants an opportunity to make things right; or the person, who in the midst of a down day we're having, takes the time to pop in and thank us for something we didn't realize meant so much.

These people, these events, these places reveal the living God.

As we cherish those moments when Christ makes himself known, we should remember that God uses us as triggers, too, so that others might have the living Lord revealed to them. We are the vessels by which God becomes known to the world. After all, like he told Peter, so he tells us, "Feed my sheep."

I may have shared this with you before, but at the church I served in Nebraska, we served a meal a few times a year for a local prison ministry on Sunday evenings. Different groups in the church would sign up to take it on our assigned nights.

The first few times we brought the meal, we served barbeque. And one of the side dishes that goes great with barbeque is baked beans. Well, after the meal, we noticed that not many of the baked beans were being eaten. They were pretty tasty, but the roaster was still quite full after everybody had gone through the line.

Puzzled by this, we soon discovered that baked beans were a staple back at the work release center where the inmates lived. They got beans in some form there all the time. And when these folks arrived at our meal, then, one look at our baked beans triggered thoughts of a home they didn't want to be reminded of.

From that point on, we scrapped the baked beans. Instead, our side dishes became homemade salads. Those salads disappeared in no time, because they were tasty but also because they triggered memories of home and the hospitality they remembered receiving at home from their mothers or grandmothers or spouses.

Maybe homemade salads didn't trigger the presence of the risen Christ in these folks, but perhaps they, made lovingly by God's people, triggered thoughts of what Christ brings—comfort, hope, and love.

Christ is present and reveals himself through us—the people who intersect daily with those deeply in need of hope amid their daily journeys.

Rev. Gary D. Jones was at one time rector of St. Stephens Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia. In an article he wrote for a newsletter called *Spirit*, he shared his experience at a clinic where he himself had been treated for cancer.

“Not long ago, I had to return to the clinic to have my blood drawn and analyzed, just to make sure the chemotherapy wasn't killing me. Those visits were hard, and I wasn't eager to return. All the way there, I was dreading it.

“And when I arrived, I saw it was all pretty much the same – lots of bald people waiting to have their blood drawn or to receive a blood transfusion. Some with family members, others waiting alone, and a few with a kind of vacant look in their eyes. ‘How did I get here?’ they seemed to be thinking. ‘I'm going to die soon anyway; maybe I should just go home. But I'm afraid. Nobody knows what this is really like...if only somebody would hold me and love me....’

“And once in a while, a drug rep or a doctor would come walking briskly through the waiting room, heels clacking loudly on the floor, seemingly oblivious to the wasted patients around them. I remembered seeing such healthy and hardy people stomping by when I had been a patient – I remembered wishing they would slow down. I wanted them to realize that they were walking on holy ground here, and a gentler presence was called for. But then I remembered – this purpose-driven stride was the way I had always walked through waiting rooms and nursing homes myself. I knew what it was like to feel very busy, with lots of important work to do.

“And then I noticed the sweet nurses who had played such an important role in my healing. I had hair now, so they didn't

recognize me. But they were still going up to the gaunt patients in the waiting room, smiling and calling the patients by name, putting their arms around these people who could hardly walk. *'Come unto me,'* Jesus said, *'all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'* This is exactly what the nurses were saying, in their gentle, loving and encouraging way.

“And then, I heard a nurse inside an adjacent room, flipping through charts, as she prepared to call her next patient. ‘Gary Jones,’ she said quietly and reflectively to herself. And then, as if suddenly remembering, she burst out loudly, ‘GARY JONES!’ and came running out of the room to where I was sitting. At first, she didn’t recognize me, because she had never seen me with hair. And besides, I had started weeping when I heard her calling my name. I don’t know what happened to me; I just couldn’t help it.

“But I recognized her. She had cared for me for months. She was my sister, my mother, my friend, my priest.... In the way that Jesus intended us to be for each other, I realized that she was my Lord, whom I recognized when she called my name.”

We are that nurse, we are the hands that make those homemade salads, we are the friend who listens, we are the teacher, the coach, the mentor, the care-giver. We are the ones Jesus told to feed his sheep. We are the triggers by which others know that Christ is alive.

Thanks be to God.