

Showing the world our wounds (Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31)

## **Some people say they don't identify as Christian because of what they see, or don't see, in the church.**

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I've been reading Gregory Boyle's new book *Barking to the Choir*. Early in the book, Father Boyle makes reference to a *New Yorker* profile of American Baptists that relayed the resignation of one congregation's leaders to the fact that "secular culture" would always be "hostile" to Christianity. "I don't believe this is true," says Boyle. "Our culture is hostile only to the inauthentic living of the gospel."

These words make me think of Thomas, that great doubter. That's what we call him based on this week's Gospel story. Thomas has a couple of other minor roles in John's Gospel, too. In John 14, he is the one who asks the question, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, how can we know the way?" He is also the brave one who says in John 11, when Jesus says he is going to Lazarus, "Let us go, that we may die with him."

The appellation "doubting Thomas" sticks, however. But it is not really accurate. There is a Greek word for doubt, and John does not use it. He uses the word *apistos*, or "faithless." Thomas is not a doubter; he is faithless.

He says it himself, in front of the other disciples. He doesn't say, "I doubt it." He says, "I will not believe"—unless I see.

Lately I feel like I hear the whole world in his words. I hear the “secular culture” that is supposed to be hostile to Christianity; I hear the “nones” who are not affiliating with any religious organization. I hear youth who drop out after confirmation, and what they are really saying is that unless they see, they will not believe. I know people who say they do not identify as Christian, and when I ask them why, they say, “because of Christians.” Because of what they see, or don’t see, in the church.

But what is it that they want to see? Do they want to see impossibly perfect lives? Do they want to see a kind of purity? Do they want to see us in our glory, drawing lines in the sand, excluding the unrighteous?

Maybe they’re wrong to ask. As Jesus says to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” And when I tell church members what I know, sometimes they shrug it off.

The first reading for this Sunday is about the early church. The people held all things in common; they cared for the needy. Acts says that “great grace was upon them all.” Perhaps it sounds naïve to our ears, but when we can no longer see Jesus, when those around us can no longer see Jesus, they are looking for him in our lives. They are looking for him in communities of faith that care for those who are needy, that sacrifice rather than hoard, that include rather than exclude, that listen before speaking.

They are looking for us to hold out our hands to see if we have wounds.

Jesus holds out his wounded hands to Thomas, the proof that his love and suffering are real—that he is the same man who was crucified. Maybe that is what the world is asking from us: to see what we are willing to risk for the sake of love, for the sake of one who loves us.