

**“Learning To See Kenny” – Rev. Jennifer Adams**  
**October 25, 2009 – Proper 25B**

Many of you know, some of you don't that this week we suffered the loss of a very special member of Grace Church. Kenny Scholten died on Tuesday night after battling several long bouts of pneumonia and eventually complications from the flu. He was 54 years old. For those of you who can't picture Kenny, he was that little man, about 4 1/2 feet tall who walked slightly bent over, had Down's syndrome and for the last several weeks he'd come up to communion lugging along an oxygen tank in order to help him breathe. Kenny was at Grace for about thirty years and there are few people who have touched Grace as deeply and broadly as Kenny did, and as I said had his service yesterday, certainly none who have done it with as few words. Kenny was as faithful as they come. And he loved it here and he was truly loved here. And so for awhile, we'll mourn and we'll miss Kenny and we'll give thanks that he is now healed and whole and at home with God.

And so as we hear the gospel story today with this on our hearts, we might think of Kenny as having been the blind man by the side of the road. Because, he was. When Kenny was born, kids with Down syndrome were sent off to state institutions; there were no formal educational opportunities for them and it was extremely rare for special needs kids to be included in any communal sorts of experiences. But when Kenny was a little kid, he and his family had a different vision for how things could be, so they decided to camp out on the edge of things, cry for mercy and pretty much demand a response. And that decision in itself took a lot of guts – crying out by the side of the road generally does. And just like in the gospel story (it's too bad this piece is so predictable,) people tried to silence them, “sternly ordering them to be quiet,” is how Mark put it. But Kenny's family (like the blind man in the gospel) refused to be quiet, “Have mercy on us!” “Have mercy on us!” they cried out and eventually, they received it. And (to make a long story short enough for an Episcopal sermon,) Kenny's family and the network of other family's they pulled together helped birth the Ottawa Area Center from which Ken graduated at age 26. It's literally because of our Kenny and his family that safe, caring-filled group homes, educational settings and parental networks exist in our area. Special needs kids are given the opportunity to see in new ways; they are given opportunities to learn, to play, to be welcomed, challenged and loved into their wholeness. Just like everybody else.

Now one of the groups that responded to Kenny was Grace Church. Kenny got here because Tina Veldhuizen, long ago member and now priest in South Bend was the house manager at Kenny's group home. And one Sunday morning instead of coming by herself she threw the whole gang in the car and brought them here. Tina had a church she loved, and these other people she loved who she believed could use a place like this. Sometimes that's how it happens. Tina made the connection one Sunday morning and Kenny stuck. And he stuck tight. And Grace Episcopal became his church. And eventually he had jobs here, ministries just like anybody else – sometimes doing them better than anybody else – for years, Kenny brought forward the food basket at the offertory, he took the collection downstairs after the service, he turned off the organ and the lights as people were leaving. And he also offered the wonderful service of cleaning up whatever cookies, cakes, brownies or slices of pizza were left at the end of coffee hour. Kenny was heard here. He was responded to and welcomed here. He was allowed

to grow more fully into his wholeness here. Grace was Christ in this story, having mercy, giving sight. And that's something for us to celebrate.

But here's the beauty of stories like this one. You can flip 'm around and they're still true. Kenny was also the Christ in this story. And Grace was the blind man (we just didn't know it which I think is how the flip sides of these stories generally go.) Kenny did more than just get his jobs done here. Kenny broke us open to see in ways that we wouldn't have seen without his presence with us. And he did it by just being here and by being Kenny here. And I think there is a lesson in that for all of us. When Kenny danced (which was more like a unique little wiggle thing he did while sitting on the edge of the choir loft) when Kenny danced he reminded us that our gifts of music matter and that those offerings are worthy of celebration. When Kenny raised his fist in the air and trumpeted because he lacked words, when he lifted his fist and trumpeted in that Kenny way at the end of communion he proclaimed for us the joy of the feast. When he refused to let go of the chalice and went on to take another gulp or worked to set new record highs for the number of cookies you could hold in one hand, he taught us about abundance. Kenny helped us smile and most important, he helped us see on a weekly basis that there is an understanding out there that often goes beyond our understanding. Kenny had that. He was the Christ in this story; having mercy on us and helping Grace Church grow more fully into our own wholeness. . . as does everyone who is here.

So sometimes, like the blind man in the gospel you have to shout your head off a little in order to get noticed, in order to change your own condition or the conditions of others. And that shouting can be a risky thing that takes a lot of courage and strength. But that kind of shouting is an act of faith – it indicates a belief that things can change. And I don't think large scale change often happens without at least a few, and often a many who are willing to camp out by the side of the road and make a little noise. And so one of the things we can pray for this morning is that, like Kenny and the blind man, we find that kind of courage when we need to and we take action for the sake of mercy reaching all. But this morning we should also consider a long-term goal, which is to stop making those by the sides of the roads have to work so hard to be heard. Parents shouldn't have to cry out in order for their kids to be acknowledged and received into our communities. Those on the margins of the church shouldn't have to shout to be included in the Body of Christ. Where's the mercy in that? Those on the edge of society's programs and networks of care shouldn't have to work so hard simply to get a compassionate response. Those on the margins of the world shouldn't have to wait for loud, earth shaking crises just to get our attention. That's not mercy. And mercy and vision are what this gospel call us to.

The good news is that because of people like Kenny and the blind man in this story we can believe that mercy is an option, a gospel option, a grace-filled option that maybe in itself is gospel. Even when there are those telling the ones crying out that silence is the road to wellness, we can step out and offer something else. We can be ears for those who need to be heard and welcomed and responded to with love. The miracle is that in the end it is we who are given sight.

Amen.