

My Dad loved people. He was always looking for someone to talk with and was very perceptive of others. When he retired, he worked part-time as an instructor at our community college. It was the perfect job, and he loved being in the classroom.

He shared a story about a lady who attended one of his classes but didn't seem interested in anything that he had to say. She came to class on time, looked out the window the whole time, lost in her thoughts.

After observing her for a week or two, my dad stopped her after class and asked her what he was doing wrong. Surprised by his question, she asked him what he meant. He explained that he was doing his best to make the material interesting and engaging and all she did was look out the window. She looked at him with a weak smile and said, "Mr. Maddox, you aren't doing a thing wrong. I signed up for this class to try to occupy my mind. My son just died, and I have to find something to fill my time. I come to class just to have a place to be because I can't stand to be alone."

And there, from simply looking up and seeing someone, my dad made a new friend. He chose not to think about how he might be offended by a student who was distracted and never lifted a pencil. He saw her and recognized that her value came not by what she accomplished, but in who she was.

It's easy for the person in the front of the room to see the faces of the classroom and realize that there might be someone who needs a friend. But in our "heads down", social media driven world, sometimes we forget to keep our heads up and really look at people. Our culture is constantly looking down, and as we do that, we are training ourselves to only think about ourselves.

That is the very opposite of what Jesus did. He always had His head up, looking for the next person in need of grace and friendship. Jesus sought people out to connect with them. Of course, He had many that came to him, but He reached out and talked to people who weren't expecting to be noticed. Fishermen. The woman at the well. Even when he was on His way somewhere, with something to accomplish, he was never too busy to see people. When the woman touched the hem of His garment – he stopped. Zaccheaus in the tree? Noticed and brought into the conversation.

We need to be aware that there are those around us here, at church or at schools and co-ops that need a friend. If we don't look up, we will never see them. And if we are only looking at our own friends, in our tight circles, we will miss them. We need to expand our circles, talk to one another, and spend time listening to what is going on with people that we don't know. Sometimes that means leaving our cozy circle and sitting quietly with someone. Maybe they aren't comfortable chatting...but maybe sitting with them quietly is enough to make them feel included.

Opening the circle is action. Leaving your circle to join someone else is action. Inviting someone to join your conversation is action. Let's open our circles, make new friends and be the love of Jesus in action!

KEY VERSE: Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

1 John 3:18 NRSV