

There Is More To Seeing Than Meets The Eye  
a homily by  
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(based on Mark 10:46 - 52)

There is more to seeing than meets the eye.

The collection of Scriptures we call The Bible is primarily about one thing: it is about seeing and being seen. From virtually the first page to the last this is true.

You don't go more than a dozen verses into the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures where, in the first of two very different creation stories, God is spoken of as a power who brings "what is" into existence, stands back and "sees" what has been created and pronounces it as good.

There was a story that made the rounds in seminary. God calls Gabriel over and says, "Hey Gabe, look what I've done. I've created a planet that spins in such a way that every place on the planet gets twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of night." Gabriel looks and says, "That's cool. What are you going to do now?" God says, "Call it a day."

A few chapters later Moses is in the desert tending his father-in-law's sheep, when he "sees" a bush that is on fire but not burning up. The story says that God "saw" that Moses had "seen." So God calls to Moses: "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses says, "You don't have to shout. I'm right here."

"Well, don't come any closer. And, take off your sandals. You are standing on Holy Ground. I am God."

Then, the story says, "Moses hid his face, afraid to 'look' at God."

God says, "I have taken a long hard 'look' at the affliction of my people in Egypt."

All the way through the Scripture this seeing and being seen is held up as a primary spiritual teaching right up until virtually the last page of the book of Revelation where John “sees” a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.

The problem is there is more to seeing than meets the eye.

Take that Moses and the burning bush story. One of my favorite lines from the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning is -

“Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who *sees* takes off his shoes -  
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.”

Only the one who *sees*. The rest miss it, living on the surface seeing only blackberries.

This seeing business gets even more complicated because most of us are so absolutely certain that we do see. But there is more to seeing than meets the eye.

The opposite of faith is not doubt. It is certitude. A man who has served as one of my primary spiritual teachers for years, Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr, teaches that certitude is an almost certain down-payment or indicator of evil behavior to follow. And we can be so certain about our ability to see.

The older a word is in any language the more meanings it has. A phrase that has recently wormed its way into our language - “to Google” - has only one meaning. The word “see” in the short version of the Oxford English Dictionary takes up three tightly packed, single spaced columns and has over twenty distinctly different definitions. The variety of uses is really rather astounding.

The word “see” can even be a noun as in “the Holy Roman See,” the seat of the pope or of a place of power.

The word has many colloquial uses, “Let me have a see at that.”

Or,

“As far as I can see I think this is going to work.”

“I’ve seen better days.”

“I’ve seen it all before.”

“I see what you mean.”

“You’re having a tough time. I’ll see you through it.”

“Let me see the color of your money.”

And, on and on it goes.

You see my point. There is more to seeing than meets the eye.

When I first went into private practice I would see couples who had encountered some difficulty in their marriage that they needed help in resolving. I was stunned by how two people could live together for years, decades even, and see things so differently. Even in my own marriage, which is about as good as it gets, we’ll be out with another couple and one of us will recount an experience we had on a recent trip. After the telling of the story the other one of us will say, “That’s not what happened at all.” And we were both there.

We perceive things differently. When it comes to seeing there are different levels of perception for us all.

There is: I don’t see that I don’t see. That’s called self-deception.

There is: I don’t see that I see. This is called self-ignorance.

There is: I see that I don’t see. This is called self-awareness.

I had a vivid example of this level of seeing many years ago when a client told me in a session, “I am at dog level of understanding (the matter we were talking about.)” “What you mean?” I inquired. She said, “You know how you can say something to your dog and he cocks his head just so? He hears you and he is trying to understand but he just doesn’t.”

Then there is: I see that I see. This is called self-reflexivity.

How we see and our openness to moving from one level to another is at the heart of a wise and useful spiritual journey.

There is more to seeing than meets the eye.

Jesus said that one of his primary missions was to offer recovery of sight to the blind. If we don’t just sit around this teaching and pick blackberries but take off our shoes and approach it wisely and skillfully, we will see that all of the stories involving Jesus and the healing of blindness of those who do not see has to do with much, much more than physical sight.

All along the way, even those closest to him don’t seem to get it. He seems to be telling them at every turn in the story, “You have eyes but you don’t see.” Even after his death and resurrection, his followers looked at him but did not see him. Until he opened their eyes they missed the meaning of what was going on.

This homily, preached as much to me as to any who happen to hear it, for there is also a great difference between listening to something and really hearing it, is a plea always and everywhere to be open to the truth that there is more to seeing than meets the eye. That although one of the most frequently used phrases that comes out of our mouth is the phrase “I see,” we use it to indicate to a person that we clearly understand what someone is talking about, the fact is that more often than not we don’t see. Not at all. For there is so much more to seeing than meets the eye.

I can tell you after decades of being a pastor and of observing world events that many well-intentioned Christians and clergy and members and leaders of other religions have never been touched or healed by their religion. At unconscious

levels they remain reservoirs of unforgiveness, anger and illusions that can spring into action at a moments notice.

I think, without being overly dramatic, that recovering our ability to see, to truly see what is, may be one of the most crucially important and incredibly difficult tasks of our time. It is important because what Jesus saw is what he wants us to see - a world where God runs the show. It is difficult not simply because we live in a culture that immerses us in so much banality and where there are so many distractions. Nor is it simply that we avoid wanting to see what is and take responsibility for our contributions to the world being the way it is. Taking personal responsibility is, sadly, not one of the prized values of our culture. It is difficult because it is hard to see the system we are part of and which we believe gives us our security and our identity. The root of all of the violence in our lives and world is the illusion, which means not seeing the truth, the illusion that we are separate. This separation starts as an internal affair, not seeing our own wholeness, and then leads into the false belief that we are separate from others, from God. We fail to see that everything and everyone belongs.

The great metaphors having to do with spiritual transformation have to do with seeing. I think one of the great tragedies of religious history, and this is true for all religions as far as I can tell, is that religious teachings have been made into a set of ideas about which people can be right or wrong, and sometimes kill and die for, rather than allowing them to give us a new set of eyes with which to see ourselves, each other and the world.

In the Gospel reading for today we have a story of Jesus healing a blind man. Lifting out a single vignette from the Jesus story is somewhat like walking into the middle of a movie, watching a few minutes and then leave thinking you know the whole story.

The recovery of sight Jesus offers is just as available to us in the here-and-now as it was then. Wise and useful spirituality is about seeing what can't be seen with regular vision.

The miracle of the restoration of sight, the curing of blindness, is in allowing ourselves to be seen as Jesus saw people. He did not allow their conditions to

define them. He said, in effect, “I see you for who you are. I see past the conditions and limitations that you think define you. If you have faith that the way I see you is true about you, you will be led into wholeness.”

Someone has observed that the fastest growing denomination in the world is made up of those who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” I can understand that. Much of the damage being done in the world today is done by people who claim they are acting in the name of or for the sake of God. Besides, even at the most benign level, knowing religious stuff doesn’t make one religious any more than knowing baseball jargon and batting averages makes one a baseball player.

Jesus desire to restore sight to the blind is about our learning to see ourselves, others and the world as God does. It means seeing our identity as who we are in God. If we cannot see and experience God right here, right now; there is no reason to believe that we can experience the Sacred elsewhere and later on.

Further, it is not our job to try to correct, challenge or chastise those whom we judge to be seeing wrongly. Our job is to do our own inner work, pleading for our own blindness to be cured and then to illuminate the places where we live out our lives with the sights and insights given to us. This is one meaning of Jesus teaching “you are the light of the world.”

There is more to seeing than meets the eye.

A guru was meditating in his Himalayan cave. He felt a presence and opened his eyes to discover an unexpected visitor sitting before him - the abbot of a well-known monastery.

“What is it you seek?” asked the guru.

The abbot recounted a tale of woe. At one time his monastery had been famous throughout the Western world. Its cells were filled with young aspirants and its church resounded to the chant of its monks. But hard times had come on the monastery. People no longer flocked there to nourish their spirits, the stream of

young aspirants had dried up and the church was silent. There was only a handful of monks left and these went about their duties with heavy hearts.

“Why is this?” the abbot wanted to know. “Is it because some sin of ours that the monastery has been reduced to this state?”

“Yes,” said the guru, “a sin of blindness.”

“And what sin might that be?”

“One of your number is the Messiah, returned, in disguise and you are blind to this.”

Having said this the guru closed his eyes and returned to his meditation.

Throughout the arduous journey back to the monastery the abbot’s heart beat fast at the thought that the Messiah - the Messiah himself - had returned to earth and was right there in the monastery. How was it he had failed to recognize him? (The word “recognize” mean “to see again.”)

And who could it be? Brother Cook? Brother Sacristan? Brother Treasurer? Brother Prior? No, not he; he had too many defects. But then, the guru had said the Messiah was in disguise. Could those defects be one of his disguises? Come to think of it, everyone in the monastery had defects. And one of them had to be the Messiah!

Back in the monastery he assembled the monks and told them what he had discovered. They looked at one another in disbelief. The Messiah? Here? Incredible! But he was supposed to be here in disguise. So maybe. . . . What if it were so-and-so? Or, the other one over there? Or . . .

One thing was certain. If the Messiah was there in disguise, it was not likely that they would recognize him. So they took to treating everyone with respect and consideration. “You never know,” they said to themselves when they dealt with one another, “maybe this is the one.”

The result of this was that the atmosphere in the monastery became vibrant with joy. Soon dozens of aspirants were seeking admission to the Order - and once again the church echoed with the holy and joyful chant of monks who were aglow with the spirit of love. They even made a CD.

Just think who might sitting next to you this very moment. There is more to seeing than meets the eye.