

Layers of Sight/Blindness

The scriptures that we have before us this morning seem very appropriate to me, especially after some conversations I had with folks on Friday and others that I overheard while picking up the meals for the Meals on Wheels route which is my usual Friday morning occupation. The procedure for delivery was altered this week in order to accommodate the “social distancing” policy which is in effect as efforts are made to try to reduce the possibility of spreading the corona virus among us. The conversations I overheard were about this being an over-reaction, an unreasonable imposition being made upon individuals which was unnecessarily disruptive over something that was really not very serious—after all unless you were old or had underlying health conditions even if you got sick—it wasn’t any worse than the usual flu. I know individual who is still stubbornly sticking to this view, but I really can’t understand how so many people keep putting on blinders and ignoring the facts on the ground; the fact that many are dying and that not all of them are old or infirm. I still believe that careful hygiene is protective...but being in large crowds with a highly contagious agent possibly present is foolish. And that is what the social distancing is about...the reduction of the size of group gatherings...and thus the reduction of exposure...and since folks can transmit the illness before showing symptoms...the fewer people you are exposed to the less risk...etc. I am monitoring my exposure, and I expect that you are doing the same. We are a small group so I am not worried here, but I really worry that unless folks like those I heard talking are only complaining while they are actually complying, we will all see more suffering from this disease than is necessary. Thus my thoughts on the texts before me this week focused a lot on this theme of sight, of what we actually see and how do understand what we see and how do we interpret it through our held bias. Often it is not just what is physically before us that we see, but something else that forms the image. Just like the water at Jacob’s well last week, there is the physical appearance and then there is the perception or impression we have formed in our minds. We begin with the passage from 1st Samuel, where the prophet Samuel who has undergone a role change when the people came to him requesting that they be given a king over them like other people had...and he went from have the role of being a judge to that of being a prophet. In this passage he is given the assignment of anointing a new king for Israel while the first king still rules. Samuel is uneasy about this, but follows the instructions to go to with his horn of oil to anoint the one that the Lord has chosen. Samuel is told to go to Jesse the Bethlehemite for it among his sons that this king has been selected. Jesse has brought seven of his sons to this meeting with Samuel. As they pass before him Samuel is impressed, but here we find the passage which forms the basis of a saying often lifted as an admonishment for us about judging folks by their appearances. “But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Don’t look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.’” We often use this as advice against superficial judgment; to consider a person’s nature and how they treat others more than their outward appearances. Physical sight is so much a part of how we make judgments that this is important to emphasize. Yet despite its familiarity as a concept, it is still so often ignored. Many of our opinions about others are based on how we view their physical appearance; not on anything deeper because we allow the physical characteristics so readily seen to create separations so that we cannot into see the hearts of those not like us.

Even when not choosing someone to be the next king of Israel, the predominant message of scripture is that the Lord knows us and looks into our hearts. When the youngest son of Jesse was sent for, we are told that he was also a handsome boy. We are not told why the Lord chose him, but that the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. David became king much later, and although he was flawed, the thread that runs through his narrative was that he always loved the Lord. Perhaps that is what the Lord saw in his heart. Throughout scripture that is a consistent theme: God loves and God desires to be in a loving relationship with us. The gospel passage from John is also about sight but in a more complicated manner. This narrative of a healing story is presented much like a play with the characters and scenes shifting. It begins somewhat oddly not with an appeal from someone seeking help, which is how every other story of healing Jesus does begin. Instead, this begins with a philosophical question from his disciples, they ask: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This question echoes a thought we often hear. There are always unfortunately those who want to cast blame or create causal links between disasters, illnesses or disabilities and sin. There are some Biblical texts about blessings and curses which appear to support this claim, and these attitudes often inform attitudes and responses toward those who are victims. However here is the response the disciples received: "Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'" While I heartily endorse the first clause, I am somewhat skeptical of the second for I do not envision Jesus as self-promoting in this manner. However, having become aware of the man's blindness, Jesus' compassion led to his healing him saying: "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Jesus, because of who he is must heal, must restore for that was his purpose: to bring wholeness to the world God loves. So he restores physical sight to the man whose blindness has led to his being a beggar. At this point Jesus' part in the narrative is done until the very end. However, the neighbors and those who have known the man before as a beggar notice this change in his condition. This creates a neighborhood disturbance. They can see a physical change, but they do not understand it. Some begin to question if he is the same man. He insists he is, so they want to know how this has happened so they keep asking: "how is this possible?" He repeats the story of his healing to them. He explains how this man Jesus has made some mud, placed it on his eyes and told him to go wash it off in the pool of Siloam after which he could see. Then these curious neighbors then wanted to know where Jesus was, but the now sighted man did not know. His neighbors cannot "see" how this change has happened, and cannot accept it. Because they do not "see" here where see is in the sense of the event does not make sense to them, they cannot accept it. The story continues because these neighbors take the now sighted man to the local Pharisees seeking an answer that they can accept. When the Pharisees hear the story they have several issues with the story because it had happened on the Sabbath. Again, they have trouble "seeing" the truth of the man's testimony of the simple facts of his healing. First, they are upset that something was done on the Sabbath; then they doubt the man was even blind to begin with so they decide to involve the man's parents to confirm his former blindness; when this is done, they decide that Jesus must be a sinner. The man's healing does not fit into their image; into their preconceived notions of not only the Law of Moses, but also of the God who had given it to them. The Pharisees keep asking the former blind man about his healing, and

who had done it. His response was that if Jesus must be a prophet, if this man were not from God he could do nothing." The man who had once been physically blind, in this case has received not only physical sight but the sight which allowed him to perceive who Jesus was. As the Pharisees continue the questioning the now sighted blind man seems to also perceive that the Pharisees' questioning is serving no purpose. As they again ask the same questions, his response becomes: "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" This so angered the Pharisees that they reviled him. This did not deter his testimony as he continued: "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." The Pharisees' response was to conclude the man was born in sin and drove him out. Jesus now re-enters the story, having heard the man's fate. He approaches him and asks: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" When told that he is speaking with him, he responds that he does. The final verses of this passage are again words about sight; about those who are blind and those who see. "Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.'" That seems enigmatic, and is only partially clarified by the last statement when some Pharisees seem to question their status with this question, "Surely, we are not blind, are we?" Jesus then says to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." None of this is referring to actually physical sight, but to the ignoring of what has been shown. The healing of the blind man was an act of compassion by Jesus, but most of those around him could not accept it. They kept at him and at the event, trying to find a way to make it fit into their own framework, not God's. The Pharisees in particular did not want to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah because his teachings threatened their power and status among other things. In many ways, the teachings of our Lord also threaten many of the things that we "see" when we look at the world around us; they challenge the way we respond to those around us. We too have layers of blindness when we look at the world. In this time of crisis I would say that those who carelessly call this virus the Chinese virus are expressing an aspect of their blindness; that those who refuse to acknowledge that the example of how this infection is spreading is a warning to us about large gatherings; that those who are rushing out to hoard...well, there are many ways that we can be blind to how selfish we can be and how hurtful our actions can become. When we affirm that we are ones who follow the one whose compassion led him to heal a blind beggar who did not ask for healing, we need to remember that we are called to witness to his teachings to love and care for others and not to be blind to their needs. In this time, this may be done a little differently...perhaps by telephone or other distances but still we need to be a witness that there is light and that our faith is strong enough to carry us and allow us to truly see one another and even strangers in that light. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.