

“When Seeing is Not Believing”

Ephesians 5:1-17 & John 9: 1-38

In our first passage we hear wisdom & warnings from Paul regarding moral darkness. *“Once you were darkness, but now you are light. Live, therefore, as children of light. Have nothing to do with the deeds of darkness ... but understand the Lord’s will.”*

Our second reading, from the 9th Chapter of the Gospel of John, also deals with darkness and light. In this passage, Jesus and His disciples meet a man who had been blind from birth – and Jesus restores his sight. You would think that would be an occasion for great joy ... but instead ... people “were divided.” Something had happened that the Pharisees could not explain. To begin with, it was completely outside their experience – who ever heard of sight being restored to a person BORN blind?!? But worse than that, the healing contradicted their idea of how the world was supposed to work.

Each of us carries in our minds a set of assumptions and beliefs about all kinds of things: relationships, education, government, work, love, honor, loyalty, truthfulness, success ... This set of assumptions and beliefs forms a kind of “lens” -- called a “world view” -- which affects how we look at everything that happens in our lives and how we respond to different situations. Each person’s worldview is multi-faceted, arising from social, family and cultural experiences we had when we were young, as well as the type and strength of our religious convictions.

Unless we have spent time living in an entirely different culture – and I’m not just talking about going on vacation, but actually immersed in the day-to-day activities of that culture – we may not even realize we have this “perceptual lens.”

Let’s go back briefly and see how “worldview” plays out in the Gospel passage. When Jesus restored vision to the man who had been born blind, that healing created an internal conflict for the Pharisees. In their “world-view,” God only heard the prayers of the righteous – people who obeyed God’s law as it was found in the Torah. And the Torah taught that no one should do any work on the Sabbath. When Jesus made mud and put it onto the man’s eyes, well, the Pharisees considered those actions to be “work.” Since Jesus “worked” on the Sabbath, in their view he must be a sinner. But then, how could he have accomplished such a miraculous healing? They saw it ... but they couldn’t *believe* it.

What made the situation harder to swallow, was that Jesus wasn’t part of their “in crowd.” He had no formal religious training; wasn’t recognized or approved by the religious authorities. If the Pharisees and other leaders were to acknowledge Jesus’ miracle, they would be admitting that HE could do what THEY could not. So – not surprisingly – “they were divided.”

What happens next, is that the Pharisees start an investigation. Actually, it’s more like an inquisition! While they *appear* to be trying to find out the truth, what they *really* want is to find some way to discredit what happened. They simply cannot accept that what happened was a GOOD thing, since it conflicted with the way they understand the world.

Since they couldn’t accept it themselves, they tried to undermine it. A modern illustration –

Once an anthropologist visited a remote tribe in the Amazon rainforest. Seated by the campfire after dinner, the scientist spoke passionately about what he called the “tragic loss” of the tribe’s cultural heritage, especially its former religion. The villagers listened intently and – the anthropologist thought – appreciatively. Finally he asked, “Wouldn’t you like to regain your cultural heritage? Why not turn away from this *imported* religion, Christianity, and go back to worshiping as your ancestors did?”

There was silence for a time, while the tribal council spoke quietly together. Then the eldest turned to the anthropologist and said, “No doubt it seems to you that the old ways must be best. But I remember the time before we knew of the Christ. Our people lived in constant fear of evil spirits – darkness in the forest and darkness in the heart. But now we have the true Light and we no longer live in fear. And think about this: If we went back to our old ways tonight, you would never leave this place. For before we knew Christ we were cannibals. We only brought strangers to our village in order to eat them.”

I suspect that anthropologist went home with a new appreciation for the transforming power of the Gospel. I also suspect that if he ever told his colleagues what happened, many of them snickered behind his back. After all, they weren’t there. They didn’t experience it. They would have found his story unbelievable.

That’s the situation of our world today. The Christian worldview is no longer the most widely held point of view. Secular humanism and theistic humanism have replaced a serious belief in the presence and power of God in our lives.

So what are faithful Christians to do? Perhaps first and foundationally, let’s remember that while our world is changing, God is still God; God is still the supreme authority and ruler, the source of all goodness and truth. We must devote time and energy to biblical literacy – reading the Bible not only for information (to know what happened as a historical record) but also for spiritual formation (to shape us in daily living).

And we must be willing to examine ourselves to see which of our beliefs and practices are truly Gospel, and which of our beliefs and practices are simply human tradition. Traditions can be good, but only the Gospel is life-giving. We can change our traditions, but we must remain firm in proclaiming the essentials of the Gospel.

We ARE called to live as children of the Light, so that our very lives will be a testimony to God’s redeeming grace. We are called to welcome everyone – EVERYONE – into our midst, while at the same time continuing to gently but clearly lift up God’s standards of right and wrong.

Some would call this narrow and judgmental. Others would call it impossible. But it is what Jesus did – and what we are called to do – by the grace and power of God.

(prayer)