

Seeing with the Eye of the Heart

Sermon, Fourth Sunday in Lent

St. John's Church, Ithaca, NY

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1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9: 1-41



When I was a young child sitting here in a pew, or later in the St. Cecelia choir, I never dreamed that one day I would be preaching from this pulpit. But here I am. The Lord works in mysterious ways – he has brought me home. It is very good to be here.

Today's gospel about Jesus healing a blind man appears on the surface to be one more instance of the Pharisees picking on Jesus. But, as with so much of Scripture, it needs to be understood on more than one level. Jesus giving sight to a blind man is a metaphor for all of us coming to "see" as in understand. The Pharisees do not see; their minds and hearts are closed. They are primarily concerned with the letter of the Law and thus they are blind.

We are all born blind. We start life completely self-centered and concerned only with our own wants and desires. This is necessary for our survival as infants. Much of our subsequent growth is about learning to allow others into our world, to not always have to be the center of attention, to learn humility and discretion. But that is not the end of the road. Part of the process of maturation is coming to know and love God. I think this may be what Jesus meant when he said, "I came into this world ... so that those who do not see may see, and those who *do* see may become blind."¹ I think he is talking about coming to "see" the love of God, but having come to love God, then becoming "blind" to the material things and social constructs of the outer world.

This teaching is a little clearer in the Gospel of Thomas: "Jesus says, What your own eyes cannot see, your human ears do not hear, your physical hands cannot touch, and what is inconceivable to the human mind – that I will give to you!"²

The Gospel of Thomas is one of the texts discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. This Gospel is not a story like the four canonical gospels but rather simply a collection of the sayings of Jesus. These sayings sometimes help to illuminate some of the more obscure parts of Jesus' teachings.

¹ John 9:39

² Bauman, Lynn, trans., *The Gospel of Thomas: Wisdom of the Twin*, 2nd ed., White Cloud Press, Ashland OR, 2012, Logion 17, p. 40.

In today's Gospel Jesus is teaching us about the world beyond the five senses and beyond the letter of the Law. Another passage from Thomas says, "Jesus says, Come to know the One in the presence before you, and everything hidden from you will be revealed. For there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, and nothing buried that will not be raised."³

Jesus is talking about true seeing, true comprehension. This is the path of the heart. The opening words of the Rule of St. Benedict may be paraphrased, "Listen my child with the ear of your heart."⁴ Intellectual understanding can take us only so far. Eventually we need to let go of our mental constructs, be still, and open our hearts to the Spirit. Part of the blindness that Jesus talks about is the blindness brought on by attachment to an over-developed intellect. We need to move beyond our mental constructs and simply *be*, allowing ourselves to experience profound and fundamental intimacy with God.

Richard Rohr says that there are three ways of seeing. We see the material world with our eyes as the sense of sight reveals form and color. Then we see with our minds; our intellectual understanding and training allow us to make sense of what we see. Finally the third way of seeing allows us to be simply present with the experience: our heart, mind, and body all open and aware. This deep moment of inner connection pulls us into the naked and undefended now. This is presence, pure being, connected with all that is.⁵

Jesus would frequently withdraw for prayer after teaching the disciples and the crowds. He demonstrated the balance between an active life of service and an inner life of prayer. Allowing ourselves to simply *be* in the presence of God is an essential counterpoint to our busy lives. Only in quiet times of prayer and reflection can we come to know God.

This is how we become light as Paul described in his letter to the Ephesians. This is the true seeing that Jesus talked about. And it is not only seeing with the light; Paul says, "in the Lord you *are* light."⁶ As we become filled with the knowledge and love of God we are filled with light and even *become* light and thus help others see.

Quiet union, living every moment in the presence and awareness of God is true seeing. This is seeing with the eyes of the heart.

And now to Him whose Power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.⁷

³ Ibid., Logion 5, p. 14.

⁴ "Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem coris tui [Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.]" Fry, Timothy, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1981, pp. 156-157.

⁵ Rohr, Richard, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, Crossroad, 2009, pp. 27-28.

⁶ Ephesians 5:8

⁷ Ephesians 3:20-21