

March 26, 2017
4 Lent, Year A
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Seeing is Believing

I can't tell you how old I was when I get my first pair of glasses -- probably around the age of ten. So for 40 odd years each and every day the first thing I have done after opening my eyes in the morning has been to squint and reach for my glasses. I barely open my eyes until my glasses are found. I often say, like others who have worn glasses for many years, that I am blind without my glasses. And yes, I have reached a certain age -- or at least my eyes have -- when if I want to read a menu or small print -- I have to take my glasses off and bring the print right up to my eyes.

When I do go to the doctor to get my eyes checked, one of the most important part of the examines is when a contraption is put over your eyes and little round lenses are inserted, adjusted and then reinserted to determine if your prescription needs to be changed. Back and forth the exam goes. What is clearer, the first of the second lens? This one or that one? Number one, or number two. The patient has to pay attention and can't afford to doze off. The clearness of your vision depends on it. Eventually, through repeated testing and elimination, one is left with a new pair of glasses and clearer sight.

Seeing clearly is more than a matter of optics. Seeing is about faith and believing.

We live in a climate and culture where great attention is placed on appearances -- optics -- often at the cost of content and substance. It matters less if tough issues are being tackled and work is being done behind the scenes, people need to be seen -- photo opts, tweets, and posts, and instagrams must follow -- or else it seems like nothing is happening.

On a similar note, I read this week that in Japan one can actually pay people to appear in your selfies to post on social media so that your followers will think you have more friends -- or better looking friends and a more exciting life -- than you actually do. #Sad

Part of today's gospel message is that seeing should come before being seen. And being able to see more clearly with eyes wide open is a way to understand what it means to believe in the God who believes in you.

The past few Sundays we have heard defining encounters with Jesus in the gospels. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the middle of darkness of night and went away empty handed. The Samaritan woman at the well met Jesus in the fullness of the light of

midday and became a believer. Today's story revolves around a man Jesus came upon who had been blind since birth.

It's good to pause and consider the plight of the man. He is more than a prop or metaphor. A person born blind in the first century was entirely dependent on what their family could provide, and if the family was poor – as many were in the ancient world -- the person was forced onto the streets to beg. There were no social services, no schools for the blind, no safety net. The average day of the blind man in our gospel story had to have been long, tedious, grinding and beyond lonely as he sat and waited and begged for mercy of the passerby to throw him a spare coin. To be healed was beyond imagining – a different life beyond hope. To eat and live another day was a more pressing goal.

What makes matters worse was the question the disciples of Jesus asked: whose fault was it that the man was born blind? In the ancient world disease had a cause and it was not germs or genetics. In a world where darkness and fear prevailed, blindness just didn't happen. Sickness was not random. It was caused by the sinful actions of a person or their family. Sin could skip over generations and defined people before they ever had the chance to become their own person.

It's easy to shake our heads in the face of this outrageous and outdated question: but tread lightly lest we fall into a similar mindset. Seeking to blame others for their lot in life is alive and well in our world, even when done quietly and unaware. Like: why don't the poor take better care of their Section 8 apartments? How could that family even think of having more children if they can't care for the ones they have? Have you driven through Manchester recently? It used to be a good city. My family supported ourselves with no help from others, we project. I worked three jobs and put myself through college, why can't they do it? This differently sized person should not be able to fly coach and sit right next to me for the next three hours. Why can't parents control their children anymore?

These are very common thoughts that go through many of our minds. Left unchecked, unexamined and un-confessed we can go down a road that makes it hard to come back from -- when casting blame is more important than looking at a whole of life – looking at the person we are quick to blame.

Our ancestors came into this country the legal way we say. Regardless of how dangerous your home country is, how hard you may have worked when you were hired to wash dishes in our restaurants or to work dangerous or backbreaking breaking jobs, go home. Go back to your country.

Part of the reason I shared with you last Sunday about my evolving ministry with immigrants awaiting deportation hearings at the jail in Dover, is that I think it's important to: 1) remind ourselves that they are human beings who have traveled a long and tough road to leave crushing lives and 2) many of them have been living

among us all along and most are never even seen. And I think Jesus wants us to really think about that.

As Jesus passed by, he saw this blind man. A discussion followed on who was to blame for his fate. Jesus made a mud paste with his spit and prayed the concoction into the blind man's eyes. And the man could see again. Amazing, miraculous outcome. Of course no one believed it could be him. Certainly not the keepers of the old way of doing things: they hid behind their legalistic disbelieving and actually hauled the man's parents to prove it was he. Back and forth the discussion went. Eventually they cast the now seeing man out of their community. Jesus tracked him down and a new believer was made.

Step one: seeing. Jesus saw a man. One of easiest ways to deal with human suffering – for a while at least -- is to look away. Keep moving. I learned this when I lived in New York City attending seminary. The typical New Yorker tries not to get drawn into the life of every panhandler or homeless person on the subway or in the streets, because, sadly, there are so many.

Mind your own business, many children are taught. Don't stare. Look away. There's a risk of course. Looking away never ends the suffering. Being numb to suffering doesn't alleviate it either.

Ignoring the lot of others does not protect us from our own misfortune, trials and heartache. I don't believe it's realistic or possible that you and I can see everyone who is suffering or in need. But we can see one person, fully, in the moment.

The hard question and truth is that you and I don't know why people have to suffer. People suffer for no reason or fault of their own. People we know battling disease, illness and addiction, children are born into poverty, neglect or abuse, innocents get caught up in the violence of war, human beings are trafficked around the world like modern day slaves.

The only thing worse than suffering yourself is to watch someone we know and love suffer. It cuts us to our core. We can have the most grounded faith and compassionate bedside presence, but one person can't take away the suffering of another. How many parents wouldn't want to swap places with their son or daughter at any age? Who would not exchange places with someone we love.

When others wanted to know whose fault it that the man was born blind, Jesus pointed to how God heals. We can open our own eyes and decide what kind of life we want to lead.

The most upset with the formerly blind man followed the old teaching that said healing on the Sabbath could not be allowed. They were open to something new.

What world are we going to hold onto and defend? One that fails to see or know anything that goes against our ways of thinking or that may impinge on our safe circle, or something more.

This is where faith and seeing come into play. Moving from blindness to sight involves stopping and engaging with a world that is in pain. Stopping, caring, praying, advocating, lifting up, encouraging.

Walter Brueggemann writes in our Lenten book: "Jesus is an invitation and a chance and a summons to a different way of life."

Seeing is about understanding and being open to who God is and what God is doing in our world. Seeing is about faith.

So, in a message about seeing and faith, one ingredient is essential: light. No one using his or her eyes alone can see in the darkness -- light is required. Jesus said: I am the light of the world."

St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "So be what you are: Live as children of light. Live without fear or shame. Expose the works of darkness. Everything that becomes visible is light. Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."