

Believing Is Seeing

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“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” – John 11:40

If you misread the title of this morning’s sermon, that’s perfectly understandable, since we’re used to hearing “seeing is believing” and not “believing is seeing,” and yet, it is believing, according to Jesus, that allows us to see the glory of God. My sermon title is an attempt to summarize Jesus’s words in the fortieth verse of the eleventh chapter of John, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

We, of course, want it the other way around. We want to see in order to believe. We want Jesus to affirm the common wisdom we’ve received and handed on from generation to generation, namely, that seeing leads to believing. We want the proof first and then, perhaps, we’ll believe.

That is a very significant “perhaps.” According to the writers of all four of the New Testament gospels, lots of people saw Jesus, but only a few believed him to be the Messiah. Were they blind? Was their sight defective? Or were they simply doing what most of us do, which is to rely on our sense experience to confirm a spiritual reality?

Most of us live with the conceit that everyone in the Bible who didn’t believe Jesus to be God’s Anointed One was just plain dumb. They didn’t grasp what seems to us to be obvious, namely, that Jesus was God’s Messiah, God’s “Anointed One,” which is what the Hebrew word means. They didn’t grasp what turning water into wine meant, or what feeding five thousand people with a handful of bread and fish meant, or what, in what is perhaps Jesus’s most spectacular miracle, raising Lazarus from the dead meant. They were just too dumb or too willfully blind to see what was right in front of them. Or so we like to believe.

Just as we like to believe that we, on the other hand, had we been present at the raising of Lazarus or the feeding of the five thousand or in the boat toward which Jesus walked on the turbulent Sea of Galilee – we, unlike those other first-century dimwits, would have seen and believed.

Every generation of believers believes that about itself. Of the one hundred or so generations that have passed since Jesus’s lifetime, every single one of them, including ours, believed itself to be capable of seeing what others missed, of believing what others doubted. They – those other, benighted generations that preceded us – they might be doubting Thomases, but we’re true believers.

Or so we believe, and there’s the problem: we believe not only about ourselves, but we also believe in ourselves, and what Jesus is asking us to believe in, not only in today’s reading but throughout his ministry, is God. There’s the rub, there’s the perennial problem, and there’s the choice: we can believe in ourselves and see the world from our perspective or we can believe in God and see the world from God’s perspective. But either way, what we believe in will determine what we see. It’s not the other way around, as we commonly think. What we see does not determine what we believe; what we believe determines what we see.

This isn’t nearly as abstruse as it sounds. It’s actually common sense once you give it a little thought. Some people look around themselves and they see creation; other people look around themselves and they simply see stuff – what’s the difference? A very great deal, potentially. Creation

implies a creator to whom we are accountable, while stuff implies nothing. If you look at the world as a materialist looks at it – and there are far more materialists in the world than we like to think, and many of them are making policy for us right now in Washington – everything is fair game. As long as it's just stuff, it has no right to be left alone, no integrity of its own, no relationship to anything except us.

But if you believe that Gerard Manley Hopkins was right when he said that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God,” then you won't look around yourself and simply see stuff. What you'll see, instead, is the stuff of greatness, the stuff of glory. What you believe will determine what you will see. Believing is seeing.

And we won't all see the glory of God in the same way. Some of us will see it when we're perched on the edge of the Grand Canyon. Some of us will see it when we look into our baby's face for the first time. Some of us will see it when that baby surprises us by saying or doing something that makes us realize we didn't fail in the tremendous task of parenting.

What we see depends to a very great degree on what we believe. Do we believe that all of us, without exception, are part of the web of life, and therefore protected from exploitation? Or do we believe that some of us need to make sacrifices for others of us so that we can maintain a lifestyle we've come to regard as necessary?

I love having fresh tomatoes in the grocery store in January, but the majority of organic tomatoes in American supermarkets in January come from the Baja peninsula in Mexico, where the cultivation of this valuable cash crop is drying up the aquifers that supply the drinking water and irrigation water for farmers struggling to grow their own food. People can't feed themselves – and that's one of the most obvious signs of poverty – because the water they need for crops is being used to grow a luxury commodity headed for the tables of wealthy North Americans. And this expensive cash crop doesn't bring in nearly enough money to lift the majority of people who live in the area above poverty; it goes to the high-end grocery stores, the distributors, and the handful of landowners, many of whom are Americans. We had wonderful organic tomatoes in January when I was a child; they came from my grandmother's garden, and she had canned them in July, August, and September. What will we see when we next pass a pyramid of gleaming organic tomatoes in Whole Foods or Trader Joe's – a mouth-watering winter delectable or a call from God to a more just and sustainable way of life? What we see will depend to a very great deal on what we believe. Believing is seeing.

That's the takeaway from the story of Jesus's raising of Lazarus. Some of the people who witnessed Jesus's miraculous healing of Lazarus believed that he was the Messiah as a result of seeing what had happened. But others carried news of the incident to the Pharisees, and the Pharisees got worried, because they didn't see in Jesus's life and teachings God's Anointed One inaugurating God's realm in their midst; what they saw was a false prophet and a cultivator of political unrest, whose activities were giving ordinary Jewish people – especially poor and infirm Jewish people – hope that their days under foreign and domestic oppression were coming to an end.

And so they were, but not as anyone imagined. Within two generations after Jesus's crucifixion, Jerusalem would lie in ruins and the Jewish people would have to decide how to move forward. Some would direct their hopes and energies to a flourishing Diaspora, while others would see the catastrophe as fulfillment of Jesus's words and the vindication of their belief that he was indeed God's Anointed One. By the time John's Gospel was written, probably in Ephesus between 90 and 100 of the Common Era, those two responses to the destruction of the Jewish state had diverged so widely that where there had formerly been a religion, Judaism, and a messianic sect within it, the followers of Jesus, now there were two religions, Pharisaic Judaism and what you and I know as Christianity.

For many years, Christians persecuted the Jewish people because we believed that they refused to accept the truth of the gospel. We believed that they should have been able to see the same thing that we saw in the story of Jesus, without realizing that belief precedes perception. The truth of the gospel is not self-evident; it is not the case that any Tom, Dick, or Mary can pick up the New Testament

and, on the basis of what they read there, come to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. Belief doesn't work that way.

Rather, belief is the gift of God that comes to each and every one of us through the Holy Spirit. That's the function of the third person of the Trinity. It's God's Spirit who allows us to see the truth of the gospel; it's not the gospel that convinces us of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, it's the Spirit that allows us to see the truth of Scripture, while a person without the Holy Spirit operating in her or his life is simply going to see an old, dusty, largely incomprehensible book.

And this isn't simple gullibility on the part of believers. Skeptics say there are no miracles and that people who believe in them are simply fooling themselves, while they, the skeptics, remain clear-eyed and free from the contamination of belief.

But everybody believes in something, including skeptics, who believe in themselves. That's pretty much the definition of a skeptic, in fact – they trust only their own senses to collect data and their own mind to weigh evidence and render judgment about ultimate reality. In my opinion, that's putting a lot of weight on some pretty slender reeds.

To believe in God isn't to be gullible; it's to be trusting. It's to trust in something or Someone greater than ourselves, greater than our loved ones, greater than our political leaders, greater even than all our schemes and dreams. That sense of trust doesn't come from us; it comes from God. That trust is what and who we believe. We can't generate that belief, but we can receive it, be glad in it, be strengthened and nourished by it, and share it joyfully in the way we live our everyday lives.

The world changes when you look at it differently, and you look at it differently because you have allowed the Holy Spirit to change you. When you believe, you see things differently. You see love where others see hate. You see trust where others see suspicion. You see sincerity where others see cynicism. You see hope where others see despair. You see the glory of God where others see nothing special.

You see those things because you believe those things. And you believe those things because of God's grace. And belief is a cooperative venture: we can't generate it, but we can certainly close ourselves off to it. That's a choice that every single person makes every single day or her or his life. You can't will belief in yourself, but you can will yourself to be open to the belief that is God's gracious and loving gift. That gift has been promised to us, and that's a promise that I trust. And trusting that promise has made all the difference in my life, and I can promise you that it will make all the difference in yours as well.

A couple of weeks ago, I shared with the members of our midweek Lenten program a childhood experience that shaped the way I see God's creation and I want to wrap up this morning's message by telling the rest of you about that experience.

A woman named Jessie Clark, now long dead, lived a few doors down from us on East Columbia Street in Springfield, Ohio, and she raised flowers and vegetables in her small back yard. One morning, when I was six or seven, I went down to visit Jessie, and when I knocked on her front screen door, she called to me from her garden, telling me to come through the house and out the back door. As I descended her back steps, my eyes fell upon a tulip that was unlike any tulip I'd seen up to that point in my life. It wasn't simply yellow and it wasn't simply red; it was yellow with red flames shooting up from the stem toward the edge of the petals. I'd never seen anything as beautiful before and, judging from the impact it subsequently made on me, I've never seen anything as beautiful since. I did nothing to will my response to that single flower, but from that moment on, I began to see beauty all around me. I began to notice the small blue flowers that grew in the cracks in the sidewalk. I saw that the field behind our house was carpeted with dandelions. I realized that I could climb to the top of one of our apple trees and feel perfectly at home in the dappled sunlight and the swaying branches and the sweet aroma of sun-warmed apples.

God's world was no longer drab and dreary, despite the poverty and violence and dysfunction with which I lived at home. A single flower had captured my attention and opened up a window onto heaven-on-earth that nothing since has been able to close.

I don't believe that my faith in a beautiful and loving God came about because of that tulip; I believe that my faith, implanted in me by a beautiful and loving God as surely as Jessie had planted that flower, allowed me to see the glory of God in a single tulip in a small back garden in a poor neighborhood of a modest Midwestern town. It wasn't seeing that allowed me to believe; it was believing that allowed me to see.

I hope and pray the same for all of you.