

March 30, 2014 / Fourth Sunday in Lent / David L. Edwards

Seeing for Ourselves

1 Samuel 16:6-13 *“...for the Lord does not see as mortals see....”*

Ephesians 5:8-10 *Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.*

John 9:1-41 *“One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”*

It seemed to me that all of our scripture readings for this morning had to do with perceiving life in relationship with God. In other words, seeing for ourselves what is real and true and good, and seeing the presence and leadings of God in our own lives and in our ministries.

Saul was the first of Israel's kings, and was such a disappointment that God finally rejected him. God tells the prophet Samuel to stop grieving for Saul, for the past, and sends him to anoint as new king one of the sons of Jesse, in Bethlehem. As Jesse's sons, one by one, come before Samuel, God tells Samuel that none of them are the chosen one. When Samuel is impressed by one or the other, God tells him not to be fooled by outward appearances. Human beings are impressed by the outward, but God looks “on the heart.” The inside of a person matters most, for that is where we are connected to God, where God works in us and through us.

There is one more son, but he is the youngest and is out tending the sheep. This is David, and he is probably out there daydreaming, strumming his harp, making up poems and songs. You know how young people are! David is brought in for Samuel to have a look. In a humorous contradiction to what has just been said about outward appearances, the story notes that David is pretty good looking! So, David, the supposed author of the beloved Psalm 23 and others, is anointed by Samuel as king.

The central message of the story, besides telling how David became king, is how we look at things. Outward appearances are not the truest indicators of what is really happening. Who we think a person is not who they really are. Where and how we think God is present and working may well be not what is really going on. We are created to see with the eyes of God, which means paying attention to what is really happening, and to the deeper meanings of things and people and events. This is why we are cautioned throughout scripture, including Jesus' teachings, against making judgments. Seeing clearly and deeply into ourselves, others, and the world is an essential part of our spiritual life and work.

When we live our lives as a spiritual journey, in our relationship with God, with the sacred,

we are returning to and nurturing our capacity for this deeper kind of seeing. We become aware of the distractions that keep us from seeing life as it really is and people as they really are. The prejudices and fears we have accumulated. The preconceived notions of who or what God is, and how God works. We become more and more aware of how we are influenced by appearances, by judgments, by fixed ideas about the world. Waking up spiritually happens as we drop the scales of blindness we have accumulated and perceive for ourselves what is real and good and right. We saw this way as little children, but we lost touch with it. It is still there for us to regain and nurture.

When our granddaughter Arabella, now twenty months old, visited us recently, we took her for a walk on the property here. I watched her as she looked at everything, and was reminded that young children see things as they are, without labels, without judgments, without categories. Therefore, they really see. This is another reason Jesus told us that the kingdom of God belongs to little children and those who become like them. Being with young children reminds us of this, puts us in touch with our own true seeing. And by seeing, I don't mean just eyesight. I mean perception, awareness.

Psalm 23 makes no sense in the context of our culture, and the problem is not the psalm, but the culture. Everything we are taught tells us we lack something, and that we need to buy or achieve something to be complete or happy or worthy. The psalm starts with the radical notion that, since God alone is our keeper, our shepherd, we lack nothing, have everything we need. When we realize this and begin to live this way, what joy, what freedom! When we get caught up in the frantic pace of life around us, even in the missions in which we are involved, we become stressed or anxious or agitated. The psalm tells us that God is always trying to lead us to quiet places of rest and refreshment. We keep refusing to go there, and continue to add to the mess in the world around us. And, if God is my shepherd, if my very life belongs eternally to God, that means that I don't need to be afraid of anything—people, events, challenges, even death! The only things that go with us on this journey of life are goodness and mercy, or compassion! The translation we used this morning says that only steadfast love and mercy “pursue” me all my life. If the only things that are really trying to get me are steadfast love and mercy, I say that's a pretty good situation! And finally, I will dwell, or live, in God's house, or God's presence, every day of my life and forever.

No wonder this psalm has touched the hearts of countless people through the centuries! It is beautiful and comforting. It is also very radical because it tells us what life is really about, and it is not about all the things that have poisoned our minds and hearts, and robbed us of joy and peace and love. The psalm helps us see what our lives are really about, and the more we see this, the more liberated we become from fear, anxiousness, stress, and being vulnerable to the illusions

sold us in every sector of society and culture. We are liberated to live as channels of God's shepherding love for the world.

The story from the Gospel of John is also about seeing and not seeing what is really going on. Jesus and his disciples encounter a man who was born blind. The disciples want to talk theology: Whose sin caused this man's blindness ... his own or his parents'? Jesus dismantles the idea that suffering is punishment for sin. The purpose of this man's blindness is so that something good can happen. The existence of suffering in our lives and in the world is so that we devote ourselves to alleviating suffering. Jesus restores the man's vision, and moves on. People ask the man who did this. He says, I don't know. Well, where is he? He doesn't know that either. The story could end right there. Jesus sees suffering. He responds. He moves on, not staying around to get credit or to make a big thing of it. With Jesus, like the psalm says, the life of faithfulness and mercy is simply the way we are supposed to live.

The religious leadership is disturbed by all of this. First, Jesus has broken religious laws. The leaders cannot see that relieving human suffering is more important than right religious practices. Their theology is also offended. An ordinary human being, susceptible to sin, cannot do something like this, only someone "from God", a messiah or prophet. The religious leaders question whether the man was really born blind. Maybe he was faking it. They ask the man's parents, who confirm that their son was blind at birth and tell the leaders to ask him themselves. Finally, the religious leaders get so disturbed and frustrated that they throw the man out of the synagogue. Nothing is fitting their picture of reality! When we get caught in religion, instead of letting religion help us become truly human, we become blind to what is real and true. When our ideas about things are fixed, we cannot see what is really happening.

Something of this sort happened here this week. A self-described "Christian" school determined that one of its eight year-old pupils did not look the way a girl should look, and said that she had to look more like their idea of a girl before she would be re-admitted. The reality of a little girl wanting to be herself disturbed someone's ideas of what people should look and act like, and what they think the Bible says. This happens in every religious tradition when defending religion becomes more important than seeing and embracing reality. And it is not just in religion. It happens culturally whenever we decide who and what people should be instead seeing, and loving, who they really are.

What does all of this have to do with us as a community? When we commit to and work with our simple, very traditional, spiritual disciplines or practices, they help us regain our true vision—seeing as God sees. Our inward journey work helps us become aware of and drop our blinders, the prejudices, preconceptions, and judgments that have filled our minds and hearts, and blurred our vision. The spiritual life, the life of faith is about perceiving ourselves, others, and

the world in relationship to God, and being sensitive to the real presence and movements of God. The practice of the spiritual life is so that we can pay attention to what is really and most deeply happening in our lives and our life together.

This is very important for mission groups as we work with the things we have felt called to do. The inward journey work of the group is recognizing and letting go of the preconceived notions of how we think the mission should go. It is about not getting locked into our own ideas of things so that we are open to the working of God's spirit in and through us. For it is not about what we want to do but what God wants to bring about through our commitments, our life together, and our work.

When the Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center first began, for example, we knew we were called to establish here a place of refuge and retreat for persons of any spiritual tradition. I think that at first we envisioned a steady stream of people staying here, doing sitting and walking meditation all over the place and in the woods! Over time, we found that people were coming here for different reasons. Some for expressly spiritual retreat. Others because they were visiting family in town and discovered this as a very affordable option. Some people were coming to visit L'Arche Blue Ridge Mountains, like the aging couple who stayed here during the process of making L'Arche a home for their adult child. Things happened that we never envisioned. Like two families from South Korea who, in consecutive summers, stayed in Kitty's Cottage while their children attended Camp KBY. We had to go through some challenging times in order to learn what we were and were not called to be. The challenge for us as a mission group was to remain open to what what God was making out of this thing.

Every mission group goes through this process, not just once but all the way through. It is staying open to what God is bringing about through us and working with dropping the scales from our spiritual sight so that we see what God is doing, and letting that shape us and the mission. This is another reason why it is so important to be part of a mission group. It helps us improve our spiritual vision with regard to our own lives as well as the works that God wants to bring about through us.

The spiritual life that we are working with calls for paying attention all the time. It calls for growing in our capacity to see God's presence and working, to see and celebrate what is really going on in us, in others, and in the ministries with which we are working. The life of faith, the spiritual life, is about seeing for ourselves. Paul put it this way in his Letter to the Ephesians: *Try to find out for yourselves what is pleasing to God.* Psalm 34 says: *O taste and see that God is good.* Both mean the same thing: *Find out for yourselves that God is good.* And it occurs to me that when we are seeing this way and living this way, we are, in fact, not only seeing with the eyes of God but also loving with God's own love.