

“Seeing Rightly”

Mirrors are common accoutrement of our bathrooms and closets. We use them to adjust a tie, make sure the makeup is flattering, or that the various parts of our outfit are complementary. Yet, how many times do we really look at our self? Not in a cursory way, but a studied way. Likewise, we see others on the street, in church at work. How often do we really see them for the child of God that they are?

This week’s scripture passages all have the theme of seeing and being seen. This is a clear theme of Psalm 139 as the psalmist appreciates how God sees him in all of his daily actions, including the most trivial ones of sitting or standing. Indeed, the psalmist realizes that God sees us even as we are being knit together in our mother’s womb. God knows each of us so completely that God can write about us in the Book of Life before we are even born.

In the two lessons we did not read, from First Samuel and First Corinthians, seeing is also important. In the Book of Samuel, God calls out to the young Samuel as he sleeps in the sanctuary of the Tabernacle. But Samuel thinks that it is the priest Eli calling. It takes the blind priest Eli to discern that it is God calling Samuel. It is the blind man who can truly “see” what is happening. This is in contrast to the words that begin the passage, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”

In the Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul urges the people to see themselves clearly. He tells them, and us, that they are a Temple of the Holy Spirit. When they sin they are defiling the Temple that God made and inhabits. Remember that the Temple in Jerusalem was literally God’s House. We say that metaphorically when we speak of places of worship. For a Jew like Paul, the Temple was where the Glory of God (*kavod*) dwelt, specifically in the Holy of Holies. Paul tells the Corinthians that the human body is God’s Temple, God’s dwelling place and should be treated as sacred.

Seeing is also important in the Gospel lesson. Nathanael cannot “see” how anything good can come out of Nazareth. After all, Nazareth was a piddly little town in the boondocks of Galilee. He could not see how the Messiah could come from there. The Messiah must be of holy origins which would be Judea or Jerusalem, The City of David. It is only when Jesus tells Nathanael that he saw him sitting under a fig tree that Nathanael calls Jesus “the Son of God! ... The King of Israel!”

Sight, actual or metaphorical, is an important sense. We rely on our ability to “see rightly” in order to make our way in the world. When we do not “see rightly” we become blind to the world around us and blind to who we are. Even the most careful and discerning person can become blinded by ego, desire, passion, and pain.



When we hurt, when we want, when we think that we need something our ability to see clearly is obscured. We are no longer open to what is obvious to others. Instead of following the old saw “seeing is believing” we begin to doubt anything that does not confirm our internal monologue. If it does not fit then it must be a lie. At its worst we look for someone responsible for that lie. If we cannot see them then there must be a deep conspiracy attempting to delude us. At this point the ego has become so deranged that we can no longer see rightly. We see this happening in personal relationships, business, communities, families, and politics.

Nathanael’s internal monologue tells him that Galilee is the home of inconsequential peasants. His ego was certain that a backwater town like Nazareth could never bring forth any good. He could not see or hear rightly what Philip was calling him to. Samuel was unable to see or hear that God could be calling him, even when he was sleeping in the Tabernacle of the Lord. The people of Corinth were so blind to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that they could not see the damage they were doing to themselves by dishonoring their bodies. Only the psalmist could rightly see his relationship to God. Yet, even he sounds incredulous that this relationship exists so deeply and thoroughly.

We all struggle with the problem of seeing rightly. We create filters through which we look at others. These filters are based on slanted experiences and taught prejudices. Our seeing wrongly limits our world. In ways even more extreme than Nathanael limited his. At least he accepted the invitation from Philip to “come and see.” When he saw and heard the man from Nazareth he accepted that something good could come out of that hick town. He realized there was more to life than what he had predetermined.

Brother Nicholas Bartoli of the Society of St. John the Evangelist put it succinctly when he said, “Our challenge is to see others, all others, as God sees them. Like sunshine or rain, our love and compassion need to fall on everyone.” My goodness but this is hard, I know from my own experience. That said we are called to do as Jesus does and look beyond the exterior, beyond first impressions, and beyond the gossip and comments made by others. Jesus saw that Nathanael was, as he name means in Hebrew, a gift from God. He saw beyond Nathanael’s prejudice and welcomed him as one in whom there was no guile.

May we work to wipe away the desires, passions, ego and pain that cloud our vision. May we clear our minds and hearts of prejudices and false judgements. May we open our hearts to see as God sees and to see God in each other. Then we will see fully and rightly and we bring the Kingdom of God nearer for all.