

Sermon 4 Lent Year A
 March 2, 2008
 St. John's Episcopal Church
 The Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

Corrective Lenses for the Heart

The Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord does not see as mortals see. They look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.
 1 Samuel 16:1-13

As he walked along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth... John 9: 1-13; 28-36

There are many ways of seeing and many forms of blindness. There are also gradations of sight and blindness, and we measure our varying degrees of blurriness and distortion, some of which can be corrected and others cannot. But the relative health of our faculties isn't the only thing that affects vision. Our emotional state influences what we can and cannot see, as can the level of anxiety within and around us, and where we stand relative to whatever it is we are looking at. The business writer Ronald Heifetz uses the metaphor of a ballroom to distinguish between two kinds of sight and perspective on life. What we see of a ballroom from the perspective of the dance floor, he says, is vastly different from a view from the balcony. Both perspectives are important. If we never leave the dance floor, we miss the big picture. But if we spend our lives on the balcony, we miss all that can only be seen and experienced on the floor itself.¹ To extend the same metaphor into the realm of relationships, what we see of the dance is also influenced by how we feel about our dance partner. It's one thing to be on the floor with someone we love and enjoy; it's quite another to be there with someone we're uncomfortable with or intimidated by; and another experience entirely with someone with whom we've just had an argument.

Our sight is also influenced by what we're *willing* to look at, which makes vision a matter of the heart as well as the eye. The ancient story of Samuel's search for God's chosen king is a beautiful example of heart vision. God warns Samuel not to be distracted by outward appearances, and to look, as God sees, into the heart. There are many dimensions of reality, and to the extent that we focus on externals, we miss the potential and beauty that dwells hidden from view. And sight is affected by internal predispositions and prejudices. As C.S. Lewis wrote in the children's story, *The Magician's Nephew*, "What you see depends a good deal on where you are standing; it also depends on what sort of person you are."²

The playwright John Patrick Shanley won a Pulitzer Prize in 2005 for his play entitled, *Doubt*. The setting is a Catholic parish and school in 1964. The main characters are a charismatic young priest, determined to blow the Vatican II winds of change through the old ways of the Church, and a fierce, older nun who is equally determined to stop him. The nun is horrified by this priest. She is shocked when he preaches homilies

¹ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2002).

² Quoted in *Praying with C.S. Lewis* by Charles Taliaferro. (St. Mary's Press, 1988), 4.

extolling the virtues of doubt. She is appalled when he comes into her office, takes three cubes of sugar in his tea, puts his feet up on the table, and suggests that the children sing “Frosty the Snowman” as part of the Christian Pageant. She feels that he is undermining her authority by infusing his warmth into the stern atmosphere of the school that she sincerely believes is best for the children. In short, she dislikes and distrusts everything about him, just as, in very short order, members of the audience grow to dislike everything about her.³

The nun then learns that the priest, who often invites the boys to the rectory after gym class for cookies and conversation, has taken a special interest in the first African American student to be admitted to the school. The nun suspects the worst about the priest’s interest, and she sets out on a crusade against him. The problem, which is apparent to everyone except her, is that she sees everything in light of her already established and unshakable convictions about the priest. The playwright never reveals the true nature the priest’s relationship to the boy, and given how much we know now about such scandals of the Church (remember, the play was written in 2005), the audience is left suspended in doubt about the priest they have come to love. There are several plausible explanations for the priest’s behavior, some innocent, others less so. The nun never wavers in assuming the worst. When one of the younger nuns protests that there is no evidence against the priest, she flatly replies, “We can’t for evidence. I will bring him down, with or without your help.” In the end, she succeeds in forcing his resignation, in part by lying about a conversation she had with the boy’s mother. But the audience never learns the truth, and thus can’t know for certain if the nun, who is set up to be the object of our hatred, is, in fact, the blind one, or if in her suspicions and fear, she sees more clearly than everyone else.

There is always a paradoxical relationship between sight and blindness. That paradox is a major theme throughout the gospels. There are numerous accounts in the New Testament of blind people receiving their sight, while others gradually and willfully blind themselves and turn away with hardened hearts from the truth Jesus proclaimed. Jesus has nothing but compassion for those whose physical blindness or other human frailties caused them to suffer. He challenges the conventional wisdom of his day that taught that those who suffered physical or emotional disability were somehow responsible for their plight, an assumption echoed in the disciples’ question to Jesus in relationship to the man who was blind from birth: “Who is to blame here?” Jesus responds that no one was at fault. Blindness is part of the human condition, and in each person’s blindness there is an opportunity for God’s grace to be revealed. We are all blind in some way, and all dependent upon the healing grace of God.

But with those who are willfully blind, those who choose not to see and who hide their hardness of heart behind the guise of self-righteous legalism, Jesus feels mounting frustration and anger. “Look at what you are doing!” he cries. “Look at what you refuse to see! The compassionate heart of God is breaking all while you tally scores of righteousness that God cares nothing about.” And they, Jesus’ self-appointed adversaries, feel all the more justified to go after him the more they “see” him through the distortion of their assumptions. In their eyes, Jesus is a dangerous renegade. He heals on the Sabbath, breaking cultic law. He speaks of God with an authority bordering on blasphemy. There never see him for who he is, and they never see God through his eyes.

³ John Patrick Stanley, *Doubt: A Parable* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005).

And there is nothing Jesus can do, because they have too much riding on their view of the world to risk opening their eyes to what might challenge it.

It's a danger for all us wherever our hearts are blind. Not only are we oblivious to what we cannot see, but a part of our identity *requires* us to be blind in certain ways. For without our particular blindness, we would see what doesn't fit our world view, which would require us to change ourselves. How much easier it is to remain blind. I'm reminded of a story Anthony de Mello tells the story of monk who died and was buried by his fellow monks in the tradition of their monastery, in a crypt on the back wall of their chapel. After the funeral service, they heard noises from the other side of the wall. They re-opened the crypt, and the monk who died rose from the coffin and told them of his experience beyond the grave, which contradicted everything their tradition taught about life after death. So, they put him back in the wall.

Are there corrective lenses for our heart's vision? I think so. Perhaps the most important corrective is simply to spend time with people who see things that we don't, those who disagree with us or for whatever reason gets under our skin, and to try and see the world through their eyes. This is far more difficult to do than it sounds, for proximity to those who disagree with us reveals how wedded we are to our ways of seeing and our forms of blindness. The true definition of a liberal, one of my teachers used to say, is someone who *gets along* with a conservative.

One of my closest friends in seminary was a woman for whom I initially had nothing but disdain, and she for me. Because I borrowed my mother's Volvo station wagon to move my things on campus, she had me pegged for a well-to-do, East coast snob. Because she spent the first week of classes arguing the literal truth of biblical passages with one of our professors, I had her pegged as a rigid and annoying fundamentalist. We avoided each other for months. Then one day she overheard me tell another classmate of a shelter for homeless women that I volunteered at one night a week, and she asked if she could come along. I said okay, and she came. We were guarded with one another at first, but we wound up talking all night, discovering commonalities in places we never would have expected. We also confessed our initial impressions of one another, and we realized how wrong we were in assuming each to be caricatures rather than human beings. We were still very different people, but from that night forward our differences became something we valued in one another, a gift that we gave each other in friendship that would have been lost to us if we had kept our distance.

Another corrective lens for our hearts is the disciplined examination of our own convictions, especially those we hold onto fiercely in contested matters. I don't mean to imply that all our convictions are wrong, or that we should not act upon them. The problem is that when we are wrong (and we are sometimes), and we hold our convictions strongly, we are capable of great harm. "From the place where we are right," writes the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, "Flowers will never grow in the spring. The place where we are right is hard and trampled like a yard." This is especially true when we are attempting to help other people out of our conviction that they need to be helped in a particular way. Good intentions do not compensate for the harm we can cause in persisting in ways we believe to be right that, in fact, are not. Our eyes need the corrective lenses of open-ended questioning and the willingness to suspend our judgment long enough for another view of the truth to reach us. We may, in the end, still act on our convictions, but we will do so with a greater sense of humility for those who will bear the

greater cost if our side in any contested matter prevails. We may not know what our blind spots are, but may we never forget that they are there, and that those whose vantage point is different, may see in us and the positions we hold what we cannot.

Which leads me to a final, spiritual word about blindness. The recovery of sight is not a process we can control, however we may wish to know what we as yet cannot see. For all our corrective lenses, the healing of blindness is mostly the work of grace. We cannot gain our sight at will, nor can we thrust revelation onto another. What we can do is be open to sight, willing to receive it when it is given, and maintain a degree of humility in what we do see, recognizing that much still remains in darkness.

God, I am convinced, wants us to see. It isn't that God abhors our blindness or darkness in general, for as the psalmist says, "darkness and light to God are both alike." But healing often takes the form of light, an inner light that enables us to see with the heart. With inner light, we see one another and ourselves more clearly. With inner light, we catch glimpses of God in our midst, invisible to the naked eye. With inner light, we are given enough to go by—not for the whole journey perhaps, but for the steps we need to take today. "Lead kindly light," go the words of an old hymn, which could well be our prayer for today. "Lead, Thou, me on. I do not need to see the distant shore. One step enough for me."