

Really and Truly Seeing and Hearing

John 4: 5-26

8/29/2021

A friend of mine posted a cartoon on her Facebook page this week that struck a little close to home. She said it's her story since cataract surgery. Some of you know I have that looming in my future this fall! In the cartoon, the husband is coming into the room where his wife is on the couch, and he says to her: "I guess I'm officially old. I just spent ten minutes chasing an eye floater with a fly swatter." While I have not done that, as a very nearsighted person, I've been following floaters for several years now... they are the flies in my soup, the bumps in the road, the clouds in my skies...! I guess I have been getting more out of life, than many of you!

The kind of seeing that Jesus is doing in our passage for today, and in several other passages in the Gospel of John, actually has nothing to do with floaters or cataracts, but involves seeing deeper than any superficial, surface views of people and events: Jesus is modelling for us how to move from sight to Insight, to seeing what is going on inside a person, their thoughts, emotions, their culture, their history, in order that he (and we) can have a better understanding and interact in ways that bring more blessing and love to bear on their situation.

Some of you may have enjoyed some family reunion time this summer, and our family did, too. It was my extended family, representing both lower and upper middle class, eastern, midwest, and western US perspectives, republican and democrat, Jewish, Christian and no particular faith perspectives. Lots of potential for conflict on any given topic! Day 1, when we were just greeting one another was a day of happy greetings and funny stories. Day 2, as we began to share meals and visit sites together we began to see and hear beneath the surface of our smiles, and learned to communicate more carefully so as to include everyone, and offend no one during activities and meals. Day 3, as trust was growing, we began to share deeper personal stories hinted at while we were visiting over food and site visits. Day 4 we were really and truly seeing and hearing some of each other's deeper pain, fears, and joys so that we could bring more blessing and love to bear with each other. The Day 1 sharing was but a dim shadow of the depths of relationship that we could have with one another! We parted on Day 5, having truly seen and heard one another, and having built bridges of love connecting across economics, miles, faiths, and politics.

To really and truly see and hear with Jesus' care, we need to sit and observe one another, to read all the clues, and to listen with our hearts, as well as our ears, to the layers of story that are being shared with us.

Scholars point out that in this chapter of John's Gospel, we actually learn from Jesus and the early church, how important it is for us to break down walls of stereotypes and prejudice so that we can fully experience the extent and blessing of God's generous love.

Jesus arrives at this historic well, outside of Sychar, and is hot and tired, but has chosen to travel in this "foreign" territory of the Samaritans on purpose. He is heading back to Galilee, but this is the quickest route to get there. And, he wants to engage with some Samaritans to see if bridges can be built with these shirt-tail relatives after centuries of religious and cultural disrespect and enmity. Samaritans, centuries ago after the Assyrian occupation, through deportation and relocation of various cultural populations, came to practice a very mixed and limited Judaism which Jews did not recognize as Jewish. Strict Jews would not set foot in Samaria, nor speak to a Samaritan. We have read some of that history in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke.

So Jesus breaks the Jewish taboo by traveling through Samaria, and then breaks another Jewish taboo by talking with this woman at the well. The custom was for men not to talk with women in public, not even their wife. Women were considered the property of their husbands, and were to converse only with them, and only in private. Yet Jesus was hot, tired, and in need of a drink while he waited for his disciples to return from the village with food. This woman, coming for water from the well outside the village in the heat of the day, presented an opportunity to make contact with people from the nearby village. Jesus asks her for a drink, since he has no bucket to get one.

Their conversation moves on two levels, as Jesus does frequently in conversations recorded in John's Gospel. He speaks of God's truth in metaphors that are initially taken literally, but then as people look and listen more deeply, the metaphors are understood to be more profound and symbolic of deeper religious meaning as they continue to converse and reflect together. When Jesus asks her to get her husband, it could be that he wants to be sure her husband is informed of the content of their conversation from him, Jesus, directly, since women don't talk with strange men. But this points up that the woman is not presently married, and over time has had several husbands – whether the victim of a series of levirate marriages, or unfortunate divorces. Jesus makes no judgment, but his knowledge of her situation convinces the woman that he is from God. Her whole conversation with this Jewish man/prophet has been free of judgment, and full of acceptance and welcome. She can't wait to tell her community, so they can meet him. When the disciples return with food, she goes to tell her community about Jesus, and invites them to come and meet him.

Jesus wants this woman, and later her village, to understand that God's love and welcome are available to them **now**, and that God's Spirit can move among them **now**, as they open up to Jesus' love and his witness to God's kingdom of healing, forgiveness and acceptance-**now**! No matter that they think Mt. Gerizim is THE place to worship God, no matter that they read only the Torah, no matter that they think God is sending a teacher Messiah instead of a political Messiah, he, Jesus is the Real Messiah, who is willing to stay and really and truly see these people as God's beloved children worthy of salvation, NOW.

In our skit for today, we hear of one woman catching a sale on Christianity, that only required a few changes of behavior. This was what Jews thought of the Samaritan's faith: it was a cheap imitation and superficial version of Judaism, which they rejected. We have perhaps accused other brands of Christianity, and other religions of being cheap imitations or idol worship, and maybe even judged others for their limited faith expression or lack thereof. But Jesus asks us to stop, look, and listen to one another more deeply, and to offer care and compassion and the welcome of God's love to one another. True faith, based on God's love, requires our whole self, our whole hearts, and requires us to embrace others' whole selves as well.

Jesus and this Samaritan woman show us that when we make time to truly see and hear one another, we can experience God's saving love and grace NOW! Listening with respect and patience, we can cast out our prejudices and stereotypes, and plant seeds of hope and new life. With openness and compassion, we can build meaningful relationships that transform our futures into ones of freedom and love. As we let go of disdain and disrespect, we can open ourselves to the blessings of understanding and supportive communication and relationships.

This is what Jesus models for us as he teaches this woman about the freedom to meet and worship God anywhere, and to experience God's spirit in Jesus, in other people, in other places-- now, as we really and truly see and hear and love one another as God loves us.

This is why we come to church, to practice truly seeing and hearing one another, and truly loving one another as Jesus loves us, as Jesus show us God loves everyone. We come together to break down stereotypes, prejudices, barriers of economics and race, of disabilities and privilege. We come to create an inclusive, supportive and generous community where each one is encouraged to become the gifted, beloved child of God they were created to be.

Those days in Sychar were transformative for this woman, and for her village – because Jesus truly saw and heard their hearts, and shared God's heart with them. This is our

mission as well, gifted to us by Jesus, to truly see and hear and love all of God's people in our world today.

It can start with us and our families, to truly see and love all of our family members, in spite of and because of their very different fancies and foibles, across our different faiths, races, economic status and politics.

As we reopen our church building and programs, we have wonderful opportunities to reconnect with members and neighbors and invite them to grow in faith and service with us again. Do you have neighbors who have not connected with our church in a while? Do you have friends who are not connected with any church? Look at them deeply with Jesus' eyes, and see the possibilities for love and grace in their lives; listen deeply with Jesus' ears and heart, to hear their pain, and extend God's forgiveness and welcome. Let us be people of healing and hope in our community, where there has been so much isolation and loss. Let us reconnect with those who have been lost to us, and isolated from others, and build bridges across all that divides us.

Jesus and this woman rebuild her hope and life and the hope and life of this community, so that God's love has an outpost in Samaria that begins to extend to other communities in those early years of church history recorded in Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters.

How might we leave a legacy of hope to future generations in Geneva? In Haiti? In Chicago? And beyond...?!

May God bless you with insight beyond your sight, and understanding beyond your hearing, that you may build bridges of healing and restoration with others of God's children in this world, starting now!

Amen!

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