

FOLLOWING JESUS: A WAY OF SEEING

John 8:12, Matthew 5:14-16

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I'm not a particularly visual person. I have trouble picturing how something will look. I rely upon others to give suggestions on paint colors or furniture rearrangement. It's not one of my gifts. I greatly admire those people who can envision a painting on a canvas and then create something of beauty. I am so untalented in that area that I was a great source of entertainment at our family reunion a few weeks ago. We played a group game called "Telestrations," one of those Pictionary type games. My attempts at drawing were humorous, to say the least.

I am in awe of those who have the gift of seeing something that has not yet been created. Every single time I walk into the Cleveland Museum of Art, I stand in the atrium and look up and around. I think of the architect who saw the old part of the building, those grand blocks of marble, and conceived of a way to connect the old and the new in a way that is so visually stunning. The entrance to the museum is light-filled and welcoming. I give thanks for the creative gifts of all who made it so.

When we were beginning to re-imagine our Education Wing, we brought in a designer to give us some ideas. She walked in our back entrance, doors I have walked through thousands of times. Even though we call it our back entrance, it is really our main entrance because we have more parking in the back than in the front. She said to us, "So the first thing people see when they walk in your building is a coat rack." I'd never thought about that. I'd walked in day after day without really seeing. Based on

her insight, her vision, we moved our specially-designed Memorial Garden art wall, so that is now the first thing people see - something of beauty and meaning.

The writer of the gospel of John is working many decades after Jesus' physical time on earth. He is attempting to describe for people what this Jesus is like - both the person who walked and taught and preached and healed - but also Jesus the Christ, the powerful spiritual presence who continues to shape the community of believers. So in John we have seven images for Jesus the Christ...images like, "The Bread of Life," "The Way," "The True Vine," "The Good Shepherd." And also this one, "The Light of the World."

There are dozens of kinds of light. Which kind is Jesus? Jesus is definitely not standing in the spotlight. Jesus of Nazareth did not call attention to himself, he did not seek the limelight. He saw his mission as pointing people towards God, as helping people find a way of life that had meaning and purpose. So think of Jesus as a beacon. A flashlight that is a godsend when all the other lights go out. Imagine Jesus as a lighthouse that protects us from dangerous rocky shores.

The right light helps your vision. What if Jesus is the kind of light that enables us to see the world as he did?

To everyone else in the village, the woman getting water from the well was a topic of gossip. No one made eye contact with her. They talked behind her back. "She's the woman who's been married four times." Jesus, though, saw her. He saw her soul, her spirit, her pain. He recognized her as a beloved child of God. He looked her in the eye, engaged her in conversation, and changed her life.

He saw the blind beggar who couldn't see him. He saw Zacchaeus, who was hiding in a tree. He saw the woman who touched the back of his clothing, the woman who wanted nothing from him except for her hemorrhaging to stop. He saw them, he healed them, he talked to them, he restored them to their communities.

How many times do we walk by people without really seeing them? Even people we know? People we work with, people we live with.

I don't think it's overly dramatic to describe the present moment as an era of loneliness. Even before the pandemic, people were feeling so alone that in Great Britain, there is a Minister of Loneliness, a Commission on Loneliness and an official loneliness reduction strategy.

Sometimes people who live alone are more intentional about developing healthy relationships and outlets to participate, and sometimes people who live with others describe acute loneliness. On our way to Michigan two weeks ago, Doug and I listened to a podcast interview with a woman who is a couples therapist. She talked about the effect of technology on our relationships. She asks everyone she works with this question, "Is your phone the last thing you touch every night and the first thing you touch every morning?" And what effect is that relationship with your phone having on your relationship with your partner?

I'm not throwing stones, believe me. I struggle with phone addiction, too, and am trying to be more aware of how I really want to live. I have always admired Jesus' ability to dwell fully in the present moment. He did not engage in nostalgia, nor did he only live for the future. He was focused on where he was and the people around him. What mattered to him was how he could show love in each moment. With that as his focus,

he was alert and observant. He noticed the people the disciples ignored. He stopped on the side of the road and talked to those who were destitute. He talked to women and children. He saw the sorrow and despair in the faces of the rich man. He looked people in the eye. He saw them.

The movie, "Sergio" is about a United Nations diplomat who travels to several nations trying to broker peace between warring groups. There is one scene that takes place in the nation of East Timor in Southeast Asia. Sergio is in a remote village trying to talk to the local people about how they have been affected by the violence in their region. He stops to talk to a widow in a small hut where she is weaving. He gets into a lengthy discussion with her about how she had lost her farm, her husband, and her children to the civil war. The climax of this conversation comes when he says to her, "What do you want for your future?" The clock seems to stop; at first the widow seems to ignore him. But Sergio asks her again, "What do you want for your future?" This time, she lifts her head with tears flooding her eyes. She replies to him, "I just want to be seen." The conversation ends as he turns to walk away, and the camera captures a tear running down Sergio's face.

In her despair, this widow's words speak of the internal desire of every person to be recognized as someone whose life matters, who has basic rights and needs, and who knows that others realize he or she exists. It is a universal desire. We want people to see us, to recognize us, to know our story.

The writer of the gospel of John has Jesus saying, "I am the light of the world." The writer of the gospel of Matthew has Jesus saying to us, "**You** are the light of the world." It isn't a job just for Jesus. It's a calling for all of us who seek to follow Jesus.

We are invited and asked to see the world as Jesus sees the world, to be the bearers of the light of God's love. I asked Beau to read this passage this morning from the Message paraphrase of the Bible - the Rev. Eugene Peterson puts the familiar words in a fresh way: "You're here to be light! God is not a secret to be kept. I'm putting you on a light stand. Keep an open house; be generous with your lives."

Following Jesus means seeing the world as Jesus sees it, seeing other people the way Jesus saw other people. Really noticing one another, expressing concern and compassion, for those we know and those who are like us **and** for those whose life experiences are different than ours.

This is Ingrid Stone; I came across her obituary this summer. She died in June in New York City at the age of 79. This is why her obit made the news. It started in 1985. She was working as a volunteer at a hospice on the Lower East Side of New York City. She took a bag of groceries to an actor who was dying of AIDS. She parked her bicycle and walked up to his apartment. When the man, named Richard, opened the door to her, he was stick-thin and covered with lesions. Stone had never seen anyone who looked that sick. She handed him a bag of groceries, and he responded with utter frustration. He was too sick to cook for himself.

She looked at him and really saw him. She realized that what he needed was a hot meal delivered directly to him. She left his apartment, went to the corner deli, purchased a meal and took it back to him. This was better, but still not quite right. Richard needed food that was nutritious, comforting and appetizing. Stone did some research and the next time, she cooked something for him herself. Walking back to her house, she ran into a minister friend and told him what she was doing. He said to her,

“You’re not just delivering food; you’re delivering God’s love.” A light bulb went off in Stone’s mind. She started a program called “God’s Love We Deliver”, taking meals to AIDS sufferers throughout the city.

By 1993, it was providing two meals a day to 550 clients in all five New York City boroughs, with 1700 volunteers helping. The program kept growing, and began serving anyone who was homebound and ill with any disease. Stone’s program will go on - she has left quite a legacy.

This year, “God’s Love We Deliver” has a 23 million dollar budget; it will feed 2.5 million meals to 10,000 people. Each of those persons will be seen, seen as a valued child of God.

In Richard Rohr’s book, The Universal Christ, he writes, “Christ is the light that allows people to see things in their fullness. A mature Christian sees Christ in everything and everyone else. That is a definition that will never fail you, always demand more of you, and give you no reasons to fight, exclude or reject anyone.”

Let us pray. Holy one, thank you for seeing us as we are, accepting us, loving us and challenging us to be more like Jesus, in whose name we pray and live. Amen.