

Seeing the World through the Heart

Daniel 10: 2-20a & Matthew 6: 22-23

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 23rd August 2009

It's easy to skip right over these verses in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Coming after the Lord's Prayer, these verses are among Jesus' short aphorisms or sayings, quick teachings. They are embedded between the well-known warning against storing up treasures on earth and how a disciple cannot serve both God and wealth (6:19-21), followed by Jesus' invitation for us to consider the lilies of the field, how they neither toil or spin with anxiety, but grow trusting in the providence of a loving Father (6: 24-34). Wedged into between these admonitions is a two-verse teaching about *sight*, which is easy to miss and misunderstand, easy not to see. So let us look.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness.”

Now, if you're an ophthalmologist or optometrist, you probably would question this verse, because Jesus' description of how the eye works is biologically, clinically incorrect. Today, we understand the eye as a receptacle of light. The eye is a window that lets light in. Eyes are organs that detect light and send signals along the optic nerve to the brain. Sight is contingent upon the ability of light to get into the eye. That's why cataracts and other obstructions need to be removed in order to improve sight.

But how can the son of God who had a role in creating you and me not know how the eye works? There's obviously more going on here than meets the eye.

First of all, Jesus was merely reflecting the ancient understanding of how the eye actually works. They believed that the eye itself was a lamp, the actual *source* of light. There are several similar references in scripture, also within paganism. We find in Proverbs, “The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and good news refreshes the body (15:30).” The source of that light or lamp was deep within the self. The inner light that was mediated through the eyes and then projected out upon an object that accounts for seeing. *The better the inner light meant the better the lamp of the eye, which meant the better one's view of the world.*

Now if the inner light was bad or unsound the lamp of the eye would be unsound and dull, as well, which meant it would be difficult for you to really see the world with any clarity. An unsound inner light results in confusion – because you can't see – and eventually darkness. This means that even in broad daylight, if your inner light was unsound or full of darkness, your perception of the world could still be distorted. Just imagine then how dark it would be if the inner lamp of your eye were dark, so that you could see, but not really *see*. You would have *vision*, but not sight or insight. Your entire world would be distorted, your perspective perverted. For it is possible to walk with vision, but not really see. From a theological perspective, it is possible to see, but really be blind.¹

Just before offering these words about seeing, Jesus says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (6:21).” To talk of one’s *heart* was Jesus’ way of describing the core of the self, the inner self or psyche or soul, who we really are. Jesus makes a connection between the inner light and heart; there is also a link between one’s heart and one’s ability to see. To put it another way, Jesus says the one who follows him in the kingdom sees with and through the heart. *The Christian sees with the heart, through the heart.*

When the heart is transformed by the grace of God we then look out with compassion upon the world. When hard, cold, indifferent hearts are warmed by God’s love our outlook changes. When the human heart suffers and even breaks, we then look out and see the suffering and brokenness all around us to which formerly we were blind. When the heart has been quickened by a sense of the overwhelming mystery, majesty, and generosity of God, we then look out to the world struck by the sheer beauty and giftedness of life. The old world is renewed over and again by the renewing of our hearts. Everything is refigured and transfigured when we look at everything and everyone in the world with hearts rooted in God’s love for us,

This is why Christians see the world differently from everyone else – it’s what happens when we see with our hearts convicted by grace, seeing with the heart of God, so that God’s concerns, God’s heart, become the concerns of our hearts. For those in the Kingdom of God everything looks different. The Christian perceives the world with a unique kind of depth that has its origins deep within the heart renewed and renewing by Christ. And, the resurrection changes how we view everything. This morning we will close worship with an Easter hymn that speaks of the changed perspective the resurrection brings. Even our attitude toward money changes when hearts are transformed. All of life becomes aligned with the generosity of God and we see the abundance set before us.

Do you see the world with your heart, through your heart? Psychologists, since Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Jung (1875-1961), have shown us that what we see or don’t see – within us, in others, of reality – has to do with what’s going on in our hearts and brains. *Reality is malleable; it isn’t fixed.*

Contemporary physics is showing us that to a considerable degree the world becomes as we see it. There’s a whole lot going on in front of our eyes but we cannot see it. We only see what we want to see. “This is because we only see what we believe is possible and what we deem possible is contingent upon patterns of learned behavior.”

“For example, there is a story of what it was like when [Christopher] Columbus’ [c.1451-1506] ships first arrived in the Caribbean. The people of the islands could not see the ships sitting out there on the horizon, because it was unlike anything they had ever seen before. There was no knowledge in their brain, [no framework,] no experience of what clipper ships looked like. The shaman, the religious leader, stood along the shore looking out at the horizon and noticed some ripples out in the ocean, but no ship. He didn’t know the cause of the ripples. So he went out for several days and looked and looked and looked until eventually he began to see the ships. [The ships came into focus.] The shaman went and told others and because they placed their trust in him, they also began to see the ships.”² I learned about this account from

watching the movie, “What the Bleep Do We Know,” which if you haven’t seen it, go and rent it (or buy it, which is what I did after renting it). It’s full of similar examples.

This is a powerful illustration. Even though light was getting into their eyes, they still couldn’t see the ships. Maybe Jesus knew more about quantum physics and the physical make up of the world than he let on. There’s more going on around us all the time. We see what we believe is possible. We live in a *participative universe*; to a remarkable degree, the world becomes exactly what we bring to it.³ Jesus brought and brings us a new vision. Jesus brought and brings something new to the world and he invites us to see what he sees.⁴

How are we seeing the world? If the inner eye of the heart is dark, then the world becomes very dark indeed. How about us? What are we looking at, but not seeing? Is God’s abundance and presence at work, right in front of you, yet invisible? Can you see in the person beside you? At work in this church? Is God’s calls before us, but we fail to see it? Are the needs of suffering people all around, but we cannot see them? What prevents you from seeing? Like the natives trusting the shaman, we need to trust Jesus’ vision of the world and live into it. He will help us to see – because we need help to see. We each have blind spots.

We need visionaries, and artists, and poets who give us more to see. We can be especially thankful for the sharp, discerning eye of the poet.

The Nobel laureate, Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004) had a great eye. He was a Christian and looked out upon the world with such a view. He could find the ordinary as the occasion for extraordinary praise and wonder. Listen and “see” how he catches an ordinary street scene:

But a paraplegic in my street
Whom they move together with his chair
From shade to sunlight, sunlight to shade,
Looks at a cat, a leaf, the chrome on an auto,
And mumbles to himself, ‘*Beau temps, beau temps.*’ [*Beautiful time.*]
It is true. We have beautiful time
As long as time is time at all.⁵

For the paraplegic every living thing is the occasion for praise – *beau temps, beau temps*. So beautiful, beautiful time that allows us to see. The paraplegic sees what most of us overlook and Milosz helps us to see the paraplegic, whom we might have missed. Like Jesus, he calls us to see.

And when we see – really see the kingdom before our eyes – we know it and everything changes with it. We finally see what we’ve been missing. Suddenly there is an illumination and what is illuminated is nothing less than sheer beauty.

Ten years ago the provocative movie “American Beauty” was released, with a brilliant screenplay by Alan Ball and directed by Sam Mendes. It’s a disturbing film, provocative. It’s certainly not for everyone and I wouldn’t recommend it for everyone. Yet, there are so many

poignant and gripping scenes in that movie which wake you up and force you to see reality in a new way.

At one point one of the leading characters is murdered, shot. While looking at the life drain away from his body, we hear his voice floating over the images of the crime. He says: “I had always heard your entire life flashes in front of your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second isn’t a second at all, it stretches on forever, like an ocean of time... For me, it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp, watching falling stars...And yellow leaves, from the maple trees, that lined my street...Or my grandmother’s hands, and the way her skin seemed like paper...And the first time I saw my cousin Tony’s brand new Firebird. [And the people I loved.] I guess I could be pretty [ticked] off about what happened to me...but it’s hard to stay mad, when there’s so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I’m seeing it all at the once, and it’s too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that’s about to burst...And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can’t feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life... You have no idea what I’m talking about, I’m sure. But don’t worry...you will someday.”⁶

Have there been moments in your life when you have been so struck by the exquisitely heart-breaking beauty of this world, the beauty of people, the beauty of creation, even the beauty of the most mundane, ordinary thing – like an folding metal chair, a pen, a paper clip – so much beauty that it’s just impossible to take it all in, that fills your heart ready to burst like a balloon?

It’s through hearts that expand and then break with love and beauty – like Jesus’ own heart and his heart in ours – that transforms the way we look out and see the world, a world with people living, and suffering, and dying, and yet always yearning for life and ever more life. Hearts that expand and then break with love and beauty – that changes everything.

Prayer: Jesus – give us more to see. Give us hearts that expand and break in compassion, that through our broken hearts we might see the world anew, discovering the needs of your people, and discovering in everyone and every blessed thing your beauty that transfigures all. Amen.

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¹See M. Eugene Boring’s commentary in the *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 210.

²From the movie, “What the Bleep Do We Know,” Twentieth Century Fox, 2004

³Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco: Barret-Koehler Publishers, 1999), pp. 61ff.

⁴From the quotation worship bulletin: “I will give you that which eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and hand has not touched, and which has not entered into the heart of man.” Jesus, the Christ, in the [Gnostic] Gospel According to Thomas.

⁵ Czeslaw Milosz, "A Mistake," *The Collected Poems, 1931-1987* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1988), p. 222. See also T. M. Moore, "A Prophet in the Wasteland: The Christian Legacy of Czeslaw Milosz," *Theology Today* 62 (2005): 156-170.

⁶"American Beauty," Dreamworks, 1999.