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Seeing What Cannot Be Seen

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

The tribes in North Natal in South Africa have a custom; when one tribe greets another, they say the words: “sawubona”, which can be translated in English to mean “We see you.” The customary reply is: “yabo sawubona” which means “We see you too.” One person has said this greeting sets up seeing as a dialogue, a recognition of each other, of all a person or tribe is, and sets up a relationship of trust and obligation to work together for the best for all. However, you choose to translate this custom, it feels to me like a greeting of respect, as it indicates a seeing beyond the practical definition, of seeing in the physical sense. In this case, it is one tribe seeing or recognizing each other for all they are, for the ways they live with the intention of working together to live together in peace.

Similarly, in the 2009 epic science fiction award winning movie *Avatar* directed by James Cameron, about a US soldier who finds new life as an avatar on an alien planet, the term “I see you” plays a major role in the plot and character development of the movie. For the alien race on the planet, the term “I see you” is how they say, “I love you”. “I see you” is how they express another’s feelings and soul mean everything to them. It is recognizing that someone else’s existence matters.

Likewise, the term “I see” can be used to express gaining understanding about something which a person previously did not understand. It can also be a way of expressing an awakening, of being aware of a situation, or recognizing an aspect of a situation, or person, that was previously unnoticed. It can be a deeply startling moment for someone when they see something or someone they thought they were familiar with in a new light. Some people claim to experience this phenomenon when they fall in love, or have a baby, or after a loss.

Seeing seems to be an essential part of today’s Gospel lesson, where Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. Today’s Gospel takes up where last Sunday’s left off; Mary Magdalene had told the disciples that she had seen the Risen Jesus, and later that day the Risen Jesus appeared to the disciples. But it seems they didn’t recognize or “see” him until he showed them the wounds from the crucifixion. Then he gave them Peace and commissioned them to go forth forgiving sins. But we heard there was someone missing: Thomas. And while we don’t know why he wasn’t there with the rest of the disciples, when they told him what had happened he didn’t believe them and proclaimed he wouldn’t believe until he saw for himself those terrible crucifixion wounds. And we heard he got that very opportunity a week later,

and after seeing, he believed Jesus to be God, which is a bold statement of faith. And Jesus then spoke about those who believe without seeing him. The word “see” in some form appears no less than 5 times in today’s section of John’s Gospel, which brings us back to the importance “seeing” in this Gospel.

Certainly, the author of John must be implying more than the physical or practical definition of the word because of the impact “seeing” has in this Gospel. Seeing seems to indicate an awakening, more than an intellectual understanding. Notice no one in this section of John’s Gospel ever says, “I know.” And while this may not be an intellectual experience, it is still significant and still life-changing. Experiencing the Resurrected Jesus seems to cause those who encounter him to see a new reality, one the resurrection has created and opened the way for us all to be or live. A way we heard is about sharing Peace and giving forgiveness. And in John’s Gospel, Jesus says we don’t have to touch those crucifixion wounds ourselves in order to see him or be part of the resurrection reality. Which is good news for us because none of us was around 2000 years ago. But it still leaves us with the question of how to see that which we cannot touch.

It’s a good question. One I found myself having to address earlier this week when I spoke at the United Campus Ministry’s commemoration of the 50th year anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. While I was honored to be invited to participate in this event, I struggled with what to say because unlike most of the speakers at that event, I was not alive in the 1960s. I did not march with the civil rights groups. I did not watch Dr. King speak in person. I have no memories of Dr. King, so I couldn’t join those who gathered to remember him that day.

While I have read his speeches, books and essays, many times, and watched videos of him, and listened to my elders recall their memories, I lack the experience of living through what he lived through. What I do have, is the honor of seeing his vision of the Beloved Community become a reality. I’ve seen and been in a community where we all were able to see each other for who we really are, and to love each other for who we really are, and when we did that, we created a community of equals. We created a community of compassion, where we respected each other, we forgave each other, and we changed our views without shame or reproach, but with happy joy. We found ourselves living in the peace Jesus bestowed on his disciples in our Gospel reading today.

This Beloved Community developed my senior or last year in seminary, and recently, when one of our professors died in an accident, even though we weren’t able to come together at the same physical location, we did all reach out to each other as best we could, sometimes on social media. And it was beautiful to see words

of love and compassion and grief transcend all the words of anger and division that can dominate social media. And that is how I can see Dr. King, even though I never met him, I have seen his Beloved Community, which is also what the Risen Jesus commissioned his disciples to do and to live into in today's Gospel. And because I've lived in a Beloved Community, it helps me see reality, and despite all we might hear that tries to convince us otherwise, I do believe all humans are capable of living into the Beloved Community, if we choose to.

But first we may need to let go of whatever illusions are getting in the way of our seeing. Two years ago, Parker Palmer wrote a reflection about the time he learned about how Americans feel about illusions. He and his wife were visiting the Grand Canyon, and when they went hiking, they noticed children playing dangerously close to the edges of the canyons. He said they would gently ask the children to play in a safer area only to have the parents of those children give them a hard time for their efforts. When they asked a park ranger about this, the ranger said it was very difficult to convince visitors that they were not in an amusement park, like Disney World. Most people truly believed there were hidden nets to catch people placed all over the canyon, or that it wasn't as deep as it looked. The ranger said in his experience, he saw how Americans truly preferred their illusions to reality.

Parker Palmer further reflected that illusions can give comfort; it can be a comfort to believe in superiority of a certain race, or generation, or gender, or orientation, or whatever. It can be a comfort to think someone else will take care of a creating a healthy community, so we can watch TV. It can be a comfort to see businesses or institutions as either good guys or bad guys in a battle without seeing how our consumer dollars affect them. It can be a comfort to think of people as shallow stereotypes instead of the complex human beings we really are.

Palmer then remarked that becoming disillusioned or seeing what is real instead of what we want to see, is the first step toward spiritual health, and seeing reality enables us to begin to work on issues and problems in all their complexities. This means there are no simple solutions, and that is okay, because simple solutions are most likely another illusion that prohibits instead of welcomes the Peace of the Risen Jesus.

Perhaps that is the experience the disciples had when they encountered the Risen Jesus. That might be what happened to Paul when the scales fell of his eyes in the Book of Acts. It is certainly what happened to me as I began living in the Beloved Community.

Even more importantly, that is how the world will see the Risen Jesus, through the ways we followers of Jesus create and express the Beloved Community or Peace of Christ, as a parish and when we as individuals participate in our other communities. The Resurrection of Jesus invites us to see, to see beyond the illusions we create for ourselves and recognize reality and live in ways that show the world Jesus is Risen Indeed. Alleluia.