

You are the Messiah

Reverend Tom Robinson
Sermon March 22, 2009

The older I get the more I appreciate seeing well. Maybe that's because the older I get the more I don't, and the more I need these glasses. It would be nice to be able to see without them. But a part of being older is accepting that my eyes are not going to get miraculously better, so I need to see Dr. Seipel once in a while. But it's important to do that because of how much I value seeing. It is probably my favorite sense. To see loved ones, to see places, to see the texture of a plant, all of these are some of life's most precious gifts. And we receive these gifts by seeing.

But as our New Testament lesson tells us this morning, there is seeing and then there is seeing. You can see perfectly and not have a clue what you are looking at. On the other hand, you can be aware of your blurred vision, but be in a better position to receive the healing you need so you can see well.

Over the next three weeks, leading up to Easter we will be looking at passages that give descriptions of who Jesus is. For today, we hear these stories that deal with Peter's phrase, "You are the Messiah," and these stories challenge us to examine what that means for us. What does it mean that Jesus is our Messiah? What does it mean to be a Messiah, the Hebrew for 'God's anointed One'? To answer that question, we have to see Jesus for who he is. And that is not as easy as you would think.

This difference between seeing and not seeing has been much on our minds lately, and not just because we are all getting older and corrective lenses may be in our more or less immediate futures. The economic crisis which has occupied so much of our attention is a classic case of seeing but not seeing. So many people, who know far more than I ever will about the intricacies of the economic system, didn't see the approach of this collapse. For too long, there was the vision of a rosy economy, with money to be made and kept to one's self. The horizon seemed to be unlimited, and people kept getting on the financial gravy train. But that line has long since hit a very serious derailment, and it's interesting to note how many people – whom you would have thought knew better – never saw it coming. And many others don't have an idea of when we will be getting out of this recession which has claimed so many jobs and dreams.

We in the church, though, are in no position to cast darts at those in the economic circle for their tendencies to be shortsighted. We have had our own lapses in vision. We thought the days would never end when the church and the state were in lock step with each other, when the church would be a major player in the influence of society, when the powers that be would always listen to the spiritual leaders. We didn't need an appointment with our favorite optometrist to know that that vision is now very much off. All we needed was a look at last week's headlines from our brothers and sisters of the Roman Catholic Church, and the news that in the Diocese of Cleveland many churches will be closing, and many others will be consolidated into others, because of diminishing resources. While the churches in Avon Lake are in good shape, a drive downtown will get your attention on this matter. Two of the most prominent steeples on that drive – St. Ignatius of Antioch on West Boulevard and St. Colman's on 65th Street - are among those scheduled to be closed, sending many people into deep levels of grief.

In the church, in the economy, in our daily lives – the ability to see clearly is critical. But the ability to see on another level is even more important: To see beneath the surface, to see what is genuine, what is real; these are important in today's culture. It's important because that is what people

are looking for. They aren't looking for glitzy images and fancy style. Most people want to see what is real; they want to see what really matters to someone, they want to see what values a person has by what they live by. They want to see that which is noble and respectable, that which is worthy of attention.

This section out of Mark has something to say about seeing – about seeing who Jesus is, and in seeing what it means to follow him. The first story deals with a man who is brought to Jesus by some friends who want their buddy to see. Jesus takes him out of the village, so as not to make a public show of all this. Our middle class, 21st century sensibilities are mightily offended at the thought of Jesus spitting into a guy's eyes. But this should not keep us from seeing that this man and his friends saw in Jesus someone who had the authority to heal. But the guy doesn't see right away. The miracle doesn't seem to work. He sees people, but they are out of focus, to say the least. They look like trees walking, the man says. He knows he can't see right. So Jesus puts his hands on him once again, and the man's sight is cleared.

The man goes off with his friends, and we are immediately – to use one of Mark's favorite words – on a retreat with Jesus and his disciples. On the way he asks them what are people saying about him, what are people thinking of him. This is not Jesus asking for self-assurance; he's got an agenda. He has something he wants his disciples to see.

They give out the answers, and then Jesus turns the tables on them. And when he does that he also turns it on all those who follow him, all those who claim to be his disciples. Your feet don't have to have the dust of Caesarea Philippi on them to know that the question is asked of us – “Who do you say that I am?”

Peter answers “You are the Messiah.” Peter sees! At least we think he does. But as they go along, Jesus tells them what this means. They see the Messiah as being the mighty one on horseback with a conquering army, who is marching in to throw out the Romans and restore the Davidic Monarchy. Jesus sees his Messianic role as that of suffering, rejection, death and then resurrection.

Peter instantly sees the error of Jesus' ways, and like any other good friend he takes him aside to tell him. But then Jesus looks at Peter and he looks at the rest of the disciples, who were perhaps wavering, thinking, “Yeah, this isn't the way it should be.” But Jesus is the one who sees things clearly. He sees that his way will not be accepted by the powers that be. He sees that his teachings will run into resistance. He sees that his actions will lead to the cross, because he wants to destroy the dividing line between God and humanity. The cross is the only way to do that.

Jesus sees that. But Peter doesn't. Peter thinks he sees clearly. Unlike the blind man just a few verses before, though, Peter doesn't know that his vision is off; he doesn't know that he can't see. He thinks he sees fine. Here, Jesus, he seems to say, just use my glasses, see what I see. But then Jesus uses some very strong words to his good friend. Jesus knows that only if Peter hears these tough, harsh words will he get the message. Peter doesn't see, and Peter needs to know that. Peter needs to see what Jesus sees – that if anyone is going to follow Jesus, it is going to be hard. It is not going to be a cake walk. It will lead to people saying nasty things about him. It will lead to people doing terrible things to him. It will lead to death.

But Jesus sees something else. He doesn't just see the death. Jesus also sees the resurrection. Jesus sees clearly Good Friday. But he sees just as clearly Easter. And yet Jesus also sees that you

cannot have one without the other. You cannot have Easter without Good Friday. You cannot have resurrection without dying to something first.

What Peter needed to have died was his sense that he could see perfectly. He could not see because he was not seeing with the eyes of Jesus. He could not see the suffering and rejection and death. Maybe in another way, he couldn't see the raising up of the lowly, the feeding of the hungry, the freeing of the imprisoned. For these are all activities of the Messiah; these are all ways in which Jesus is the Messiah.

Like Peter we all have our expectations of who Jesus is, and what Jesus is about. But just like Peter, all of us need to have some of those expectations die off so that new expectations can live. Expectations like God only comes to nice people like me, to people who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, that Jesus only cares about people who come to church. We need new expectations, like Jesus calls on us to serve others as he did; to be an instrument of healing like he was; to care and nurture those who are most vulnerable, like he does.

On this Sunday, we consider who is Jesus, how he lives out his role as the Messiah. And as we do that we celebrate our participation in the Family Promise Program. If that sounds like a big leap, may I ask you to consider that it is not; it is in fact two parts of the same thing. To follow Jesus means to do as he did, to serve as he served, to love as he loved. When we take care of those who are homeless, to those whom society has marginalized, we are taking up our cross and following the One who is the Messiah.

But first we have to see. We have to see as Jesus does. Dr. Steve Hayner, professor of evangelism at Columbia Seminary, has a prayer that he lifts up every day. And maybe we should make this our prayer:

O Lord, may my eyes see what your eyes see;
May my heart be broken with what breaks your heart;
And help me, O Lord, not to duck. Amen.

The Bible text is Mark 8:22-9:1
©2009 ALPC