

SEEING WITH NEW EYES

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe April 3, 2011
Crossroads United Church

1 Samuel 16:1-13
John 9:1-41

It is interesting to note that both texts illustrate for us that the questions and perceptions that have captivated and engaged persons have not changed much down through the eons. In the time of David, Samuel judged a person's worth by outward characteristics. In seeking to anoint the future king of Israel he was easily seduced by age, maturity, and height. He readily assumed that age had an advantage over youth, and was quite ready to anoint the first and eldest of Jesse's sons. But the voice of God whispers into his soul that he not judge a candidate's worth on outward appearance because God looks upon the heart. In this case it was the youngest who held the lowly position of tending to the flocks who was the one esteemed in God's eyes to have the leadership qualities that God was seeking. In the gospel the disciples ask Jesus a question that has engaged persons of faith and wisdom for generations: what is the root cause of suffering. Who is responsible for calamity and less than perfection?

I don't think that it is unreasonable for us to seek some kind of rational explanation as to what went wrong when a child is still born at birth, or born with an illness that will threaten its quality of life. It still seems to be a part of a process of dealing with diagnosis and prognosis to wonder what a person did, or did not do that may have caused a particular outcome. I have celebrated the lives of those taken unexpectedly through accident and persons will be heard to say, "If only he/she had left 2 minutes earlier or later, this catastrophe might have been averted." While the devastation of the earth quake and tsunami that has laid waste must of Japan can be explained, it still causes us to wonder if something could have been done to predict or better anticipate the quake and the ensuing tsunami so that lives might have been spared that natural disaster that appeared like a thief in the night. We still seek after reasonable explanations for answers to the painful and the tragic, not unlike the disciples of Jesus, and, we still often judge a book by its cover like Samuel. But the

wisdom inherent in the Hebrew lesson reminds us that God is not shallow, and the gospel teaches that Jesus opens the eyes of those who are poised and ready to see who he is, and what he has come to do. It is fraught with irony as we recognize that the blind are the ones who can see who the Christ is, and the lofty, religious elite of Judaism are blind.

It strikes me that where we often get into trouble philosophically, faithfully and routinely in the daily living of our lives is when we put limitations on understanding. That which stymies and mystifies must be explained at some level- a hypothesis postulated and research into possible answers investigated. We have lost sight of the largeness of and vastness of possibility. We have ceased to be in awe of creation. We have become accustomed to finding a niche for ourselves in a place or space that is branded as modernist, or post modernist, post- theistic, consumer driven, contemporary, educated, spiritual, communal, academic, technological, humanistic or demographic. We place increasingly small and defining walls around ourselves such that a shepherd can never be perceived as possessing the qualities of kingship, and a blind beggar will never be other than a blind beggar.

This is also where the parameters of our faith in this post modern technology based place and time in which we live can become problematic. We do not want to be perceived as naive or conservative in our thinking. The stories of the miracles of Jesus become less about healing and more about theology, and transformation. And surely John is hinting at the ability of the marginalized to recognize the Light of the world that had come in Jesus, while the religious elite were blind to it. And yet implicit still in the text is for we in our post modernist reality and domain to see that Jesus continues to be significant in his particularity to the Christian faith as he was in first century. What is it that we see in Jesus of Nazareth from the vantage point of experiencing in a different way?

Rachel Remen is a medical doctor and therapist to people living with life threatening disease, has written a book that is an anthology of essays and spiritual

insights gleaned from her work with patients living between diagnosis and death. It is a beautiful and inspirational book that encourages the reader to view circumstance through the lens of mystery, faith, hope, love, the miraculous and the healing. One essay is titled The Question, and tells the story of a man who had lived with Alzheimer's disease for ten years. He had two sons and was lovingly cared for at home by his wife. One Sunday, when his wife was out doing some household chores, the two sons aged fifteen and seventeen were at home with their father.

By this time the disease had progressed to the point where their father was unable to speak, feed or clothe himself. As the three men watched a game of football on the television the father fell out of his chair and slumped on the floor. He was ashen and his breathing uneven and rasping and the older brother told his younger brother to call 911. Before the younger brother could react the father spoke. The sons had not heard their father speak in ten years. The man said, "Don't call 911, son. Tell your mother that I love her. Tell her that I am alright." And then the man died.

Years later the younger son now a cardiologist was sharing this story in a group. He shared, "Since he died at home unexpectedly an autopsy was required by law. My father's brain was almost entirely destroyed by the disease and for many years I wondered who had spoken. I have found no answer in any medical journal or text, and I am no closer to knowing the answer now than when I was a teenager. But I carry the question with me as a reminder of something important that I do not want to forget. Much of life can never be explained but only witnessed."

I have been privileged to witness-not unlike the cardiologist in this illustration-a person seeming to return to lucidity for a moment before breathing their last. And it is a great gift to see one last time the person that we knew and loved coming back to reassure those being left behind that all is well. It does not always happen, and when it does there will always be skeptics that argue that one is only imagining it-seeing what one wants and needs to see in order to let go. And in the sharing of these stories the response of the wider community can be similar to that of the Pharisees in the healing

story from John.

There will always be those who are unable or unwilling to ponder the power of mystery and will be quick to respond that it was an over active imagination, or being sleep deprived, or the hallucination from prescribed narcotics. There will be challenges to the veracity of diagnosis, like in the text, suggesting that he was not really blind. There will be demands for second opinions, like the questioning of the man's parents in the gospel, and then the reciprocal mudslinging of those in authority who cannot bring themselves to believe that things are as they seem. The blind grasp who it is who is among them. The blind do not need to explain the how and the why of the experience- the blind are content to declare that once I was blind but now I see. And once we have been given sight, we cannot choose to be blind again.

I lost a brother to complications from a bone marrow transplant, a twelve year old daughter to hepatocellular carcinoma, a five year old godson to neuroblastoma. I have been privileged to stand at the bedsides of many who fight the good fight between diagnosis and death. I have battled my own demons of doubt and faith crisis in the once upon a time of my life, and I may again in the future. I have often been asked how it is that I have not completely given up on faith. I am no great heroine of the faith and truly my suffering pales in comparison to that of many others. And if truth be told I cannot say for sure why it is that I have not completely given up faith in things unseen. I suppose that there is some truth to the tenet that we are sustained and upheld by the everlasting arms. It may be that we try to let go of our faith in things unseen, but providence does not let go of us. I am still standing here because I cannot do otherwise. Call me a fool, but I can't not believe.

This is not to suggest that I am any kind of Pollyanna. I have known moments personally and professionally when I would have preferred to run away from the face of suffering that I had the opportunity to witness. I have grappled with unanswerable questions and felt like a failure when I have had to respond, "I don't know" to a question posed. It is not that God causes suffering but God will grace us with an opportunity to

see the phoenix rise up out of the ashes if we dare to watch in hope. As I penned this paragraph earlier in the week our Music Director was practicing the organ in the sanctuary and over the din of voices in the hall outside of my office I heard the familiar tune of silently now I wait for thee, ready my God thy will to see. Open my eyes illumine me. Spirit divine.

Sometimes the eyes of our souls are opened to the power and presence of providence by having our ears unstopped and our hearts, souls and brains emptied of the cares of the day such that we are able to be still and know that I am God. A God who sees not as the world sees, A God who looks beyond the obvious and the overt to see into the heart. A God who recognizes the king inside of the shepherd and the disciple inside of the one who is marginalized by handicap. A God who uses what others might define as the inglorious in order to reveal the glorious. A God who does not give up on those who refuse to open their eyes and see what God is displaying in their midst and view. A God who holds on when we try to shake ourselves loose from the everlasting cords of unconditional love, faith and support. A God who is not limited to that which can be explained, but can be experienced.

May God grace us with new eyes for seeing the signature of providence in the triumphs and tragedies of life and living. Amen