

“Seeing Is Believing...Or Is It?”

- I. Introduction: Seeing Is Believing. . .Or Is It? On the Boardwalk in Atlantic City where I grew up there was a Ripley’s Believe It or Not Gallery. On the large blinking neon sign flashing in front of the gallery was the phrase “Seeing Is Believing.” It was a catchy phrase, intended to make you buy a ticket and go into the show. Once you got inside, many of the exhibits were not all that convincing. In fact, seeing made me not believe! Early in life, I realized that there is a lot of hype to catch our attention.

Sometimes it can go the other way. The sign might say “Believing is Seeing.” Our beliefs go a long way towards determining what we do and don’t see. In fact, just like in today’s Gospel story, we can miss seeing things that are right under our very nose when we believe that they are not relevant to us. We too can miss seeing people who are sitting at our proverbial front gate.

- II. In contrast, it’s one of the core experiences of our Christian life that Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit is present always to help us see what is true more and more fully. Jesus would have us see what is true around us and see what is true within us. Seeing truth is essential for living out the Gospel. First we are offered the opportunity to see the truth more clearly through Christ, and then we are invited to act upon that truth. What does that truth look like.

By listening to the stories that Jesus told, we can have a sense of what Jesus saw as true and what actions the truth called for. An excellent example is the story of “The Rich Man and Lazarus” in Luke 18. Lazarus was a hungry and sick beggar, so sick that he was covered with sores. From the story it appears that Lazarus regularly sat outside the rich man’s gate. Daily the rich man came and went through that gate, but just didn’t see Lazarus. That changed when they both died. Lazarus was carried by the angels to be with Abraham, while the rich man went to Hades. The rich man had himself a problem. He was in a place of torment and only then did he see Lazarus. He turned to him for help. The rich man wanted Lazarus to bring him some water and to go and warn his brothers. The rich man was told absolutely not. There was a huge, impassible gap between Lazarus and the rich man that couldn’t be crossed. The rich man then saw the truth, but it was too late to act upon it.

Now I don't think this story is really about heaven and hell. Clearly, there is a warning in the story, but it is a warning about how to live in this life not so much about what will happen to us in the next. This parable affirms how much God loves those who suffer and experience pain. It makes the point that we should see and love them as well. Jesus' valuing of Lazarus is signified by the fact that he is the only person in any of Luke's parables to whom Jesus gives a name. He was the only one given a personal identity in spite of how sick, poor, and socially unimportant he was. This sad, pitiful beggar was given the name, Lazarus, which means "God heals." The first will be last and the last will be first.

- III. Our challenge as Christians is to see others, ourselves, and the world around us through the eyes of Jesus Christ. That's just not as easy as it first seems to be. Here's the challenge. It's so very easy, just like the rich man, to miss what's right in front of us. Here's how it happens to me. I once walked past a homeless man on Broadway in New York City who asked me for money. I was hurrying to a meeting and walked past him. He said to me in a loud voice "You don't have to give me anything, but don't look through me as if I don't exist. I'm a person too!" His words cut through to the core of my being. He was right. I learned something of great importance from him.

I start out most of my days with a schedule. It's fine tuned and full. Then during the day come what we so often call "the interruptions" – the unanticipated, un-timed "interruptions." Now the temptation is to dismiss these interruptions as interferences and then turn our backs on them. I am sometimes tempted to do that – especially when I'm in a hurry or have a goal in mind or a deadline to meet. Then I remember reading about the priest who was always complaining about the interruptions in his schedule until one day he realized that in these "interruptions" God was sending him opportunities for ministry. In fact, the priest concluded, these interruptions were usually the most important part of his day.

Let me give you an example from a previous parish. One day I received a frantic long distance call from a woman I'd never met in a distant state. The call seemed random . . . she had gotten my name off the list of diocesan priests in our area without any knowledge of who I was. Her son had been in an automobile accident on the interstate. His life possessions were in that car, which had been totaled. The car had landed upside down and he had nowhere to go. It was tempting to call a social service agency, but I didn't. God had other things in mind.

When I met this man I learned that he'd been a lifelong Episcopalian. He'd grown up in the church and was heading home after several job failures. He was in a vulnerable place and needed help. He wasn't able to describe fully what had happened to him. That first meeting began a long series of ministry interventions by a number of people with this young man that may have saved his life. Our parish church took

him into our community. We saw that God had sent him to us. During the upcoming months, he lived with several parish families; parishioners found odd jobs for him and then steady employment. Parishioners helped get him the medical treatment he needed. Parishioners invited him to join a small discipleship group and provided transportation for him to get there. All of these different parishioners had the option of walking past this man, failing to see or to respond to his obvious needs. With Christ's help, they saw him for who he could be, and he used the help that was offered very well. Recently I heard that he is now teaching. Had I been too busy hurrying to a meeting the day his mother called, we might well have missed the miracles God had in mind to show us.

Long after I first met this young man I learned a startling piece of information that re-enforced my realization that this was a ministry opportunity sent by God. It turned out that this young man's mother, who called me randomly, was in the same bridge club in her home state with my step-sister. Our last names are not the same. There's no way his mother could have known that. God was forging a connection over many miles between a desperate mother and a parish willing to respond to someone in deep need who came to our gate.

- IV. Who's Outside Our Gates at the Church of The Ascension? Who is our Lazarus? Who are the people whom we don't see but who need our help? We need to look harder at and beyond our gates to see who needs to become a part of the Body of Christ at Ascension. I believe that we will discover that many people who appear to need something from us have in actuality a great deal to give us. And we need to look harder within our gates to discern the needs within our parish that are not "seen" and therefore unmet. Let me close with a quote from Barbara Brown Taylor's (1997) book *The Bread of Angels*. She's referring to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus:

Jesus could not stand the way people loved the things they could get for themselves better than the way they loved the things God wanted to give them. They were satisfied with linen suits and sumptuous feasts when God wanted to give them the kingdom. They were content to live in the world with beggars when God wanted to give them brothers and sisters. (Emphasis added.) They were happy to get by with the parts of the Bible that backed up their own ways of life when God wanted to give them a new life altogether. (p. 112)

Let's make a concerted effort to see the needs of our brothers and sisters around us more clearly and to respond to those needs more and more energetically. Amen.