

Sermon for January 14, 2018
“Seeing and Believing”

John 1:43-51

People say that seeing is believing. That is not always the case. Sometimes people see, and they don't understand what they are looking at. Or they just give it a cursory glance and don't take time to understand. Perhaps they have a preconceived idea of how things are and even were then look, they only see what their prejudices say is there.

To the writer of The Gospel According to John seeing is important. The word he uses for “seeing” is *eido* and he uses it more than any other book in the New Testament. He uses some form of it 109 times. *Eido* means more than just seeing, it also means understanding. So, to see in John is not just taking a cursory glance at something. It is more than mere visual perception of something. It means perceiving what it is one is looking at. *Eido* is the word John uses when Thomas says he must see the wounds in Jesus' hands and side before he will believe in the resurrection. Do you *see* what I am saying?

In our passage today when Phillip comes to Nathaniel and says, “We have found the one prophesied about. It is Jesus of Nazareth,” Nathaniel thinks he already knows what sort of man this must be. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth” so what kind of holy man could this be. His preconceived notions told him this Jesus is a waste of time. However, Phillip says “Come and *see*” or in other words “Check it out and take a good look for yourself.” When Phillip arrives, it says that Jesus *saw* him, but it is more than just Jesus seeing a man walking toward him. It turns out that Jesus perceived that he was a man of true integrity and sincerity. Jesus really *saw* the kind of man he was. And in the end Nathaniel *saw* who Jesus was.

That is John's mission. He wants people to see, really see, who Jesus is. In our post Christian society getting people to really look at Jesus is often hard. Like Nathaniel, their prejudice is that they already know about Jesus and, so they decide he is not worth a second glance. They would have to be honest with themselves and be willing to overcome their prejudices and look at Jesus for themselves. Then they can really see. And if they do look and truly see, they will see the Divine made manifest among people.

What does “Divine made manifest among people” look like? How I can help you to see what John is trying to say here? I guess I will just have to show you. Come and see for yourselves.

Look at Albert Schweitzer. One of the things Schweitzer is probably most famous for in exegetical circles is his book The Quest for the Historical Jesus. In his day many had written books about the life of Jesus that were not based on real scientific historiography, they were really romantic novels. They amounted to people's preconceptions of what Jesus should be written into Jesus' life. Schweitzer sought to rationally strip away anything about Jesus in popular writing or in the gospels which could not be verified. The end result was that he concluded the only things we could know for sure about Jesus is that he lived and died and that he said the Kingdom was at hand. He said “The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the kingdom of God, who founded the kingdom of heaven upon earth and died to give his work its final consecration never existed. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in a historical garb. This image has not been destroyed from outside; it has fallen to pieces.” (p. 554)

In the final paragraph of his book Schweitzer writes: “He(Jesus) comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.” (p. 561)

Having failed to see Jesus in the gospels, he answered the call to “Follow thou me,” and it took him to Africa. There he followed Christ as a medical missionary. There I believe he saw Jesus in his fellow human being. He truly saw who Jesus was as he followed him. And in his service to humanity we see Jesus: The Divine made manifest.

Take a look at Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a young man he sought Jesus by travelling from his native Germany to go to New York and study under Reinhold Niebuhr, who his Germany teachers prejudged to be an inferior theologian. While there he worked at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. He saw Christ in the people that he served. But seeing Christ led him to leave the safety of America to return to Germany now under the control of the Nazis. He went and saw Jesus in the faces of the Jews he helped to rescue. And maybe he also saw Jesus in the Christians who he tried to convince that the Nazis were wrong in their anti-Semitism. Despite the horrendous evil and injustice, he witnessed he said, “Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others, we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.” (The Cost of Discipleship)

About Jesus Bonhoeffer said, “Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted

him. On the Cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So, the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. There is his commission, his work.” (Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer took a good long look at Jesus. He saw one who loved others and gave his life for them. Then he sought to follow and love others as deeply. The result was that he lived among his enemies and died in a concentration camp “surrounded by evildoers and mockers.” In him we see Jesus: The Divine made manifest.

Look at Martin Luther King, Jr. I don’t believe he went to Montgomery Alabama to start a Civil Rights movement. I think he went to serve a church while he finished up his doctoral dissertation. But in the racial division of Alabama he heard the call to “Follow Thou Me.” And he followed Jesus, who said, “forgive them for they do not know what they are doing,” as he was crucified.

Jesus had said “love your enemies” and Martin Luther King, Jr. sought to follow Jesus in that. In 1957 he preached two sermons by the title “Love Your Enemies.” He said, “That’s why Jesus says, ‘Love your enemies.’ Because if you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption.”(November 1957) He truly saw Jesus as he strove against injustice and said, “Was not Jesus an extremist for love: ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.’” (“Letter From a Birmingham Jail”)

King looked at Jesus and saw someone who loved people even those who persecuted him. So, King sought to act as loving as he could even to those oppressing him while striving against their oppression to liberate them from it as well as himself. He loved his enemies to the end when he was assassinated. In him we see Jesus: The Divine made manifest.

Take a look at Clarence Jordan. He went to seminary and studied Greek to see Jesus. He earned a PHD in Greek so that he could study the Bible more carefully. Jordan is most famous for his “Cotton Patch Gospels.” He used his knowledge of Greek to not only translate the New Testament from Greek to English but also from first century Palestine to the cotton patches of 1960’s Georgia. What is not as well known about Clarence is that in the 50’s and 60’s he was the founder of Koinonia Farm, a Christian community that included both whites and blacks. His statement for racial equality earned his farm house the right to be shot at periodically by people driving by who did not like the farm’s integrated nature.

He said, “Even though people about us choose the path of hate and violence and warfare and greed and prejudice, we who are Christ’s body must throw off these poisons and let love permeate and cleanse every tissue and cell. Nor are we to allow ourselves to become easily discouraged when love is not always obviously successful or pleasant. Love never quits, even when an enemy has hit you on the right cheek and you have turned the other, and he’s also hit that.” (The Substance of Faith: And Other Cotton Patch Sermons)

Clarence looked at Jesus and saw someone who loved people even when they lashed out in hatred. So, Clarence sought to love with the same depth. He loved all, even the people taking pot shots at his house. He tried to speak to all God’s children in the cotton patches of Georgia and the world through his writings. That ministry became the inspiration behind Millard Fullers founding of Habitat for Humanity. In him we see Jesus: The Divine made manifest.

Take look at Mother Teresa. She left home at 18 to become a missionary and most of her work was with the poor in India. One of their early works was at a hospice. They would take in people who were dying in the streets and would care for them. Mother Teresa said of this ministry; “A beautiful death is for people who lived like animals to die like angels - loved and wanted.” The work she started continues today as many others bring the love of God to people in need.

Speaking of the poor in India, she said, “Each one of them is Jesus in disguise.” Mother Teresa went and saw Jesus among the poor, many of whom were of different races and religions. She heeded the call to “Follow thou me,” and she saw Jesus in love for the least and the lowliest. In her we see Jesus: The Divine made manifest.

I’ve got some good news! We have found the one sent by God! It is Jesus of Nazareth! You may say, “Don’t tell me about this Jesus fellow He’s old news. He’s nothing new. I know all about him.”

Maybe you just think you know all about Jesus. Look beyond what the scholars and the preachers and the teachers say about him. Don’t rely on your preconceived notions about Jesus based on the words of “religious” people. Come and see for yourself.

Look at him as one unknown. Hear him call to you: “Follow thou me.” And in the following you will see. In the toils and the suffering and the conflicts you will see who he is. You will see Jesus: the presence of God make manifest in our world! Come and see and “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”