

To See or Not To See

Sermon by John Strommen on Luke 18:31-19:10 April 2, 2017

Today is all about seeing and not seeing, on being seen and not being seen.

A few weeks ago, I brought my 98 year old dad to a choir concert on Sunday afternoon at St Stephen Lutheran Church in Bloomington. The choir was the Augsburg Centennial Singers, a choir founded by my father 20 years ago and originally directed by him. So pretty much everyone in attendance at this concert knew who my dad was or had a relationship with him. So on this particular day, dad was a rock star. He gets acknowledged during the performance, at which point the woman sitting across from us looks over in dad's direction and does one of these: (open mouthed amazement). Then after the performance, all kinds of people are coming over to my dad to say hi and pay their respects.

So, everyone there saw my dad sitting there and knew who he was. Did they see me? No! I was invisible. People would come over to my dad and walk right by me and say, "Mert, it's so good to see you!" and chat for a while. Eventually, they might finally see me and say, "Oh, you must be one of Mert's sons." "Yes, I'm John." "Great. Anyway, Mert, I think the choir is sounding really good, don't you think?"

So I was just a bald guy sitting next to Mert Strommen who happened to be his son. But you know what? That's OK with me. Of course I was invisible at that event. I have no significance in that community.

But sometimes when you're not seen, it's a judgment about your worth. When I was a youth director a long time ago I took 30 kids on a mission trip to Colorado. On the trip, I took a lot of pictures and after the trip I put together a slide show with music. When it was over, most of the kids were buzzing and excited - except Scott, who I overheard, and he said, "Gee, I was in only one picture." And it then it hit me, I had not been careful enough to make sure that everyone was in the slide show. Scott was a short, little guy, much like Zacchaeus, lost in the crowd, rendered invisible to my camera and, of course, to me.

Today in our gospel text, we have a trilogy of incidents, each of them playing off the theme of seeing and not seeing, and how sometimes the ones who are supposed to be blind actually see, and the ones who are supposed to see are clearly blind. And to top it all off, we also have Jesus, who is supposed to be blind to certain people who are not worthy of him, and yet he sees them.

In the first incident, Jesus predicts his persecution, death and resurrection. This is where Jesus' life was headed and where it had to go. And it says the disciples understood nothing about what he said. In case you missed it, it repeats "they did not grasp what was said." And these are the insiders. At the moment, they saw a Jesus who was maybe more of their own projection – someone who would achieve victory, not die. They didn't see that to conquer sin and death, Jesus had let sin and death put him on a cross.

Often we don't see either, but take heart: the disciples didn't either, but eventually they did.

Then in the second movement, we have a crowd of people following Jesus, many no doubt counting themselves among his followers, surely because they saw Jesus clearly for who he was. When they passed a blind man who learned that Jesus was passing, the man said, "Jesus, have mercy on me!" And those in front, right by Jesus, sternly rebuked the blind man. "How dare you call out to Jesus!" Somehow

they felt the blind man had no business bothering Jesus, I suppose. Not worthy. And it's interesting that it was those in front. Why is that, do you think?

The blind man persisted, shouting even louder, "Jesus, have mercy on me!" knowing full well he would incur the wrath of the crowd. But in the midst of that wrath, Jesus stopped walking and stood still. Turns out Jesus was interested in the blind man – the man who everyone apparently thought should be as invisible to Jesus as he was to all of them. And Jesus ordered his followers to bring the blind man to him.

Does this sound at all familiar? Earlier in Luke, when children were trying to get to Jesus, the children were shooed away by the disciples, but Jesus interrupted them and said, "Let the children come to me!" So on this day, when we celebrate Louise Mae's baptism, we know that Jesus sees Louise and calls her name.

Back to the blind man, though. Jesus turned to him, saw him, and loved him. Jesus then ordered that the man be brought to him. "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord, let me see again." "Receive your sight. Your faith has saved you." And he regained his sight and began following Jesus.

And yet the blind man saw Jesus quite well even before his sight was restored.

Then we come to Zacchaeus, the final story in a long line of stories where Jesus reaches out to the lost. Now, usually the lost are poor, blind, lame, lowly, without resources. Here is a man who is none of the above. He may be small in stature but he's healthy and has tons of resources and power. And yet he's counted as one of the lost. How so? Well, like most tax collectors, he was almost certainly a thief – collecting more in taxes than the Romans demanded and pocketing the rest. To make matters worse, he was a Jewish man working for the Romans, and hence viewed by many as a traitor. So how was Zacchaeus lost? He was despised, probably lonely, and his moral compass was pretty bad.

Then again, when Jesus came walking by one day, Zach wanted badly to see Jesus and, perhaps, to be seen by Jesus? Being short, just like my friend Scott, maybe he often felt unseen and invisible. So Zach was quite motivated to get a good look at Jesus. So motivated that Zach did two things that would have brought on sarcastic mockery from the crowd! Since he was short and the crowd was blocking his way, he got the idea to climb a tree. Now in this culture it was shameful for a grown man to climb a tree. Only children did that.

And to get to the tree ahead of Jesus, Zach ran. Again, children playing might run in this culture, but not grown men.

So the reviled man Zacchaeus invited even more disdain by making a fool of himself running and climbing a tree.

Oh, but why would he willingly subject himself to this much scorn? Same reason the blind man did. He saw an opportunity.

As Jesus passed and Zach probably was hiding in the branches as best as he was able, Jesus saw him and stood still. Just like for the blind man. He saw Zacchaeus, already knew his name. Probably saw loneliness in Zach's eyes, and the desperation of being in a tree. And he then called out, "Zacchaeus, come down! I'd like to have lunch at your house today."

Now, this may sound like the height of presumption and inhospitality on Jesus' part, but in this culture, for an important person to invite himself over to your house gave dignity to the person who would be hosting. It was a way of saying, "you matter."

On Wednesday nights, we've been exploring what it means to have Christ in your home. Think of Jesus inviting himself to your home today. What would you serve him? Would you play X Box with him or watch some cable TV?

And how do you suppose the crowd reacted to Jesus going over to Zacchaeus' house? They grumbled, because Jesus wasn't supposed to dignify a sinner like Zacchaeus – only people who deserve Jesus. People like...well, me. Not those people!

So Zach saw in Jesus someone who maybe, just maybe, could give him life where there was none. And Jesus saw in Zach someone who was broken, and he loved him – by first declaring that his life had value, and second, spending time with him. As a result, Zacchaeus was healed. This is a healing story. He was given a new life, one in which he was exceedingly grateful and suddenly generous, even agreeing to make amends with those he's cheated along the way.

In our stories today, we see many who seem enthusiastic about Jesus but do not see. They think they alone deserve Jesus while others are not worthy. But as our text tells us today, "the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost." We forget that because Jesus was persecuted, rejected, mocked, etc., he really does see these lost folks, doesn't he? What are ways we might be blind to folks who wander into our midst – or are already in our midst – who feel shunned or judged or shamed? This very thing is a crisis in Christian churches everywhere in America.

Or maybe sometimes we are the blind man or Zacchaeus, broken and trapped in our fallen humanity. Today we are invited to shout out boldly to Jesus or go climb a tree, because to do so is to see with great clarity, to see that Jesus is life. But be warned: he might invite himself to your house. Amen.