

### *Looking and Seeing*

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, 'He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.' Even I didn't recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel." John testified, "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. Even I didn't recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son." The next day John was standing again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus walking along he said, "Look! The Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard what he said, and they followed Jesus.

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he asked, "What are you looking for?"

They said, "Rabbi (which is translated Teacher), where are you staying?" He replied, "Come and see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two disciples who heard what John said and followed Jesus was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Christ). He led him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Jn. 1:29-42 (C.E.B.)

Several few years ago, we stopped to visit some friends while on vacation. Rich had been the pastor of a church near us when we got to know each other. Before he moved across state, we got together on occasion, and Rich and I worked together on a few projects. I began to count Rich as one of my friends, so we decided to visit him in his new home.

But a remarkable thing happened when we were there. I learned something about Rich that changed the way I interacted with him. Even Ronda noticed the difference.

In our conversation, we realized for the first time that we had gone to the same seminary at the same time.

We had the same professors.

We had the same classmates.

We had the same friends.

We had seen some of the same things.

We had experienced some of the same things.

We had walked the same hallways.

We had even taken some of the same classes.

Yet we don't remember ever meeting! (Which is significant in a school with around 100 students, only 3 or 4 of which were from the Pacific Northwest.)

When we made this mutual discovery, we began to share stories as if we had known each other our entire lives. And at the same time, we began to talk with one another as if we had never met.

I've spoken with couples who meet, date, and marry – and after many years of marriage still tell me they don't really know each other. They are still discovering new things.

For many of us, coming to church and worshipping God, or coming to Sunday School and learning about our faith, has similar dynamics. There is a sense in which we are like John the Baptist who says he didn't

recognize Jesus (Jn. 1:31). John, the man that Luke tells us is a cousin of Jesus, doesn't recognize him for who he is. Not until his eyes are opened and he sees Jesus in a new way.

Like John, we can "see" him all around us – in pictures, in words, in the lives of others – yet we don't always recognize him. Sometimes we don't *want* to recognize him, but often we haven't opened our eyes.

As we were going into a store this week, I noticed a couple walking out. I wouldn't even remember that, had it not been for what I saw next. The manager of the store came running towards the door. His face said a lot. He had seen something suspicious and was coming to look more closely. He watched intently as this couple walked across the street and got into their car.

I suspect the manager was making mental notes about their physical features – size, color of their hair, clothing – but I also saw him write something down, probably the license plate of the car. Had he just watched them leave his store, as I was doing when we arrived, he wouldn't have seen those details. It took a different kind of look.

It's the difference between looking and seeing.

Some of us are better at doing that than others. If I asked you, for instance, to not turn around before telling me how the person sitting behind you is dressed this morning, some of you would have no clue. (Some of you can't even tell me *who* is sitting behind you!) Others could probably tell me with incredible detail.

It's the way we look that determines what we see.

When I prepare a sermon, I do a variety of things to help me "see" what's in the text. I start with the assumption that God has something to say to me as well as a belief that God has something for you in the text. Sometimes I can see that more clearly than on other occasions.

I use the Lectionary, and I've always been amazed at how the same text will look different when it rolls around three years later and how often a common theme keeps showing up. Those who read my manuscripts will recognize that I also look at my old sermons.

The truth is that since I retired, I typically begin with one of those older sermons as a starting point, although most weeks I make enough changes that it is no longer the same sermon. I do that mostly because I have fewer reference materials at my disposal than I had for most of my years in ministry. Those reference materials included several different commentaries as well as several different translations of the text.

I like to begin early enough in my preparation that I can 'mull' over the text and allow it to speak to me as I prepare to preach. In years past, I would often memorize the text, and almost always had a weekly bible study, allowing me to listen to the questions and concerns of people who would be hearing the sermon later that week.

It was while studying this text a few years back that I noticed the peculiar translation of a word. I researched the word in the Greek. *emblepo*. It's only used 12 times in the New Testament, only twice in John's gospel, both of which are in our text for today.

*emblepo* is most often translated as "looked." Greek dictionaries suggest it is more than a casual glance. It's an intent look. Not unlike the way the store manager looked at the couple as they were leaving. Or the way I began to see my friend after realizing our common history.

The NRSV translates it as “watched” in verse 36 and “looked” in verse 42. The CEB uses “saw” and “looked.” In the *Jerusalem Bible*, they are both translated as “looked hard at.” When John “looked hard at” Jesus, he recognized him as the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:36). When Jesus “looked hard at” Simon, he recognized in him the rock, a solid foundation (Jn. 1:42).

It occurs to me that Jesus spends a lot of time taking a hard look at us. Jesus sees things in us we don’t see – and sometimes things we don’t want to see.

We can also take a hard look at Jesus. And when we do, I believe we begin to recognize him all around us.

- I believe we begin to recognize him in the face of our neighbor.
- I believe we begin to recognize him in the laughter of children.
- I believe we begin to recognize him in the crisp, cold winter air.
- I believe we begin to recognize him in the mist and the fog and the rain.

I also believe we begin to recognize him in the children who have no food on their table.

- We begin to recognize him in the hands of people who work the soil.
- We begin to recognize him in voices that speak languages other than English.
- We begin to recognize him in the Nursing Home beds.
- We begin to recognize him behind the counter at the bank, in the store, and at the library.

But we can only see him when we learn to take a hard look at another person. And perhaps the first person we need to take a hard look at is ourselves. Perhaps we need to begin looking at ourselves the way Jesus sees us.

When Jesus looked at Simon, for example, he saw what all of us would see: a fisherman. He probably smelled like the sea. He may have arrived in his work clothes. His skin had been darkened by the sun, and perhaps had a leathery appearance from the constant exposure to the weather.

But Jesus saw beyond that. He looked deep inside.

When he looked at Simon, he saw a man of convictions. He saw a man of compassion. He saw a man of honor. Jesus determines that this is a rock-solid citizen, the kind of person that people depend upon, and decides to call him Peter, the rock.

None of those things had been seen by others. Simon may not have seen them himself. And as the story unfolds, first Jesus, then Simon, then the twelve, and then all of those around him begin to sense what Jesus had seen.

Whether his name change came first, and he developed a sense of responsibility, or his deep-seated character was already present but not recognized until Jesus names it, I’m not sure. The way John tells the story suggests it was there all along, but no one else had ever seen it.

When Jesus looks inside of you, what does he see? Does he see the same thing you see? Or does he see much more? More potential perhaps?

Jesus sees you as you are. And I can guarantee that the first thing Jesus sees in you is someone worthy of love. It’s the simple yet profound truth that God loves you. And it’s that knowledge, it’s that truth, that allows us to love others. They too have been seen by God as worthy, as loveable, as valuable.

I think it's important to periodically take a hard look at ourselves. When we do that as individuals, we'll find someone worthy of love. And maybe find a way to forgive ourselves. Or set our fears aside and try new things .. like have a Methodist preaching in a Mennonite church.

In many ways, our time with Melissa Hofstetter was an invitation to take a hard look at ourselves as a congregation. In doing so, we saw a need to be gentle with one another as we moved through a season of profound grief, recognizing that we are not all at the same place, but that we have all been on a common journey.

The Congregational Review being planned by the PCRC, as well as the search committee process are two other places where we are being invited to look at ourselves more intently, to look deeper to see what God already sees in us.

Maybe we can learn to take a hard look at others, as well. Maybe others in the room with you today. Maybe others you'll encounter later this week. I'm convinced that whenever we do that, we'll find in each of them someone worthy of love.

We can also take a hard look at God. We do that through the study of the scriptures and through a consistent pattern of prayer. When we allow ourselves to see God with that kind of an intentional look, it is more than just a glance. It turns from looking to seeing. And we begin to see God as if for the first time. It's much like my encounter with my friend Rich.

When we take a closer look at God, we will find a God of compassion, a God of justice, a God of love. But we will also find a God who sees us and has hopes and desires for us.

It is a curious thing to note that when John tells us about Jesus calling his disciples, it is told from a different perspective than the other gospel writers. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we hear the story of Jesus looking at the disciples as he calls them to follow him (Mt. 4:18; Mk. 1:16; Lk. 5:10*b*). In John, it's the disciples who are looking at Jesus (Jn. 1:37). They come seeking him, they come looking.<sup>1</sup>

It is both a reminder and a warning, that when we look intently toward God, we may find ourselves called to work we were not expecting. But the truth is God has already seen you and knows you and loves you. Only when we look back can we see and know our purpose.

Like John the Baptist, we may find some amazing discoveries when we look hard at God. We may find a new understanding of John's image of the Lamb of God, for example. We may come to terms with God's own desires for our lives.

But more importantly, we will begin to recognize God in our midst as the ordinary events of life take on divine qualities, as the every day becomes sacred, as the mundane becomes holy.

It is all about how we look and how we see.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Sloyan, p. 25

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