Sunday, August 20, 1978
SEEING AND BELIEVING
Matthew 12:22-37; Mark 3:20-35

In the scripture lesson just read, we heard Matthew's account of Jesus healing a man who was both blind and mute. As often happened, there was a crowd of people who witnessed the event. Understandably, the healing of the man caused amazement in the crowd, leading some to ask, "Can this be the Son of David?" In other words, "Is this man the Messiah of God?" They saw the act of healing as a sign of God's work and a good act.

However, not everyone saw it this way. There were others in the crowd who saw the opposite; others who had their minds made up about Jesus even before witnessing the healing. They said, in effect, "This is not the work of God, nor a sign of God, it is the work of the devil. This man is in league with the devil, and it is by the power of evil that he has healed this man."

Jesus, having heard what the opposition said, first refuted their statement with logical reasoning. He pointed out what a ridiculous idea it was to call a healing the work of evil. Someone had been made well; how could that be evil? Furthermore, to cast out evil by the power of evil would imply a division within the kingdom of evil itself, and evil is too astute, too subtle to thus defeat itself.

In addition, Jesus pointed out that certain scribes and Pharisees also claimed the power to perform such healings as he had just done; were they also inspired by the devil?

Then Jesus went on to remind his hearers that such incidents of healing showed that the power of evil is limited by God. God has the upper hand in the universe. Furthermore, he said, "You are really mixed up and confused when you have called a good act evil."

Because of this, Jesus went on to pronounce the most devastating judgment in the New Testament. He said, "No sin, no slander is beyond forgiveness except this kind of slander and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. That cannot be forgiven." Jesus underscored this by saying that anyone who speaks a word against God's Son can be forgiven, but if one blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, he will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. In other words, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the one unforgivable sin.

This morning we are going to look at two aspects of this story as recorded by Matthew. First, we will examine the fact that although all the people present that day saw the same healing event, one group was open enough to at least consider that it might be a sign of God at work and a sign that Jesus was God's Son. However, others saw it as the power of evil at work. Later, we will look more closely at what Jesus defined as the unforgivable sin and how it can be avoided.

First then, how could people seeing the same incident see it so differently? It's not too difficult to understand because the same thing happens to all of us frequently. The fact is that we do not see things as they are, but as we are. Let me say that again: We do not see things as they are, but we see things as we are.
Our mood, our education, our training, our worldview, our past experience, our prejudices, our hates, our likes, all of these things and more help condition the way in which we see things and interpret events. They condition our whole outlook on life.

A few years ago, I attended the annual meeting of a large company here in Lincoln. One of the officers reported that the company's income on investments was down because the stock market was down and had been down for some time. A Republican administration was in power. The officer, being a Republican, did not blame the administration but other factors. This last spring, I attended the annual meeting of the same company again. The same officer was making his report. The stock market was again down at that time, but this time a Democratic administration was in power in Washington, D.C., and he reported that the reasons for the down market were the policies of this administration. Since then, the market has been on the rise, and I don't know how he would explain this.

Our outlook, our overall point of view, beliefs, all influence the way in which we see and interpret events.

Thus those around Jesus that day who had some degree of openness, who were expectant, who were not bound by preconceived notions, were able to see the healing event as possible evidence of God's work in the world. They did not prejudge Jesus Christ and his mission. Thus, they saw the healing act with some amazement and as a good act.

Others, however, came to the event with closed minds. They were sure that they already knew all there was to know about how God works in this world. Furthermore, they saw Jesus as a threat to their way of doing things; they distrusted him and were therefore always trying to find fault with him. They could not admit the fact that God might work in all sorts of ways. As far as they were concerned, God worked only through the channels which they approved and agreed with. Thus, they concluded that the healing of the blind and mute person was an act of the devil. They said Jesus could cast out demons because he was in league with the devil himself. They saw good as evil.

One cliché states, "Seeing is believing!" But for them, seeing was not believing. In fact, seeing is not believing for any of us. We do not always believe what we see; most of the time, it's the other way around — we see what we believe!

If you had been present at the healing event described in Matthew's Gospel, but were there with your 20th-century concepts of illness, you would not have seen the healing as the casting out of a demon, but would probably have defined it some other way.

If you had been there and had come to the event with an open mind and some expectancy, then you would have seen the act which Jesus performed as a basically good act and would have rejoiced that a person was healed.

However, if you believed that you had all the answers already, that you knew how God worked, and if Jesus was a threat to your way of life, then like some in the crowd, you might have seen the healing as the work of the devil. We do not always believe what we see; rather, we see what we believe.

To give another example, a child says, "Oh look, mommy, there's a purple cow," and the mother says there is no such thing as a purple cow, and so soon the child stops reporting purple cows. Gradually, as she gets older, the visual messages processed in the child's brain are modified and translated in terms of mommy's world until the child can't remember seeing a purple cow. (The purple cows then walk around with impunity, unseen by anyone.)

A team of Stanford psychologists raised batches of kittens, some of whom were brought up seeing only vertical stripes and some of whom were brought up in a horizontally striped world. Even after they grew up to be smart Stanford laboratory cats, with the ability to move anywhere, the vertical-stripers thought the world was vertical, and the horizontal-stripers thought the world was horizontal. Both groups behaved that way, and it wasn't just belief; their brains actually recorded the impressions that way. The horizontal-stripers could not see the vertical world and vice versa. In their technical language, the psychologists wrote: "Functional neural connections can be selectively and predictably modified by environmental stimulation." In other words, even physiologically, our experience shapes our perception.

Most of us have heard of the Rorschach test. Simply explained, a person looks at a series of inkblots and then tells what he or she sees in them. The fact that individuals see different things in the same blots is not surprising. And what we see tells us a lot about us. We do not see things as they are, but as we are. Thus, a zoologist and a botanist walking together through the same woods will observe more animals or more plants respectively.

If someone sees something the rest of us do not see — seeing being a certain excitation of the nervous system, to which the eyes contribute — we say he or she is dreaming or crazy or out of touch with reality because much of reality is made up of the consensus, the model, the worldview, the culture, the paradigm.

When Copernicus proposed that the earth was not the center of the universe, but rather the sun, he was suggesting a new way of looking at creation. But worldviews do not change easily. The establishment is usually invested in the old way of seeing things.

Jesus Christ suggested some new ways of understanding God and human beings and how God works, and naturally, he ran into opposition.

Basically, we see what we believe. Sometimes we've heard someone say about someone else, "Oh, she always sees the world through rose-colored glasses," meaning that the person has a positive outlook. She sees the good in most things and not the bad.

Some other people are the opposite; they see primarily the bad in all things. We all see things through glasses of some kind.

The story is told of Charlie Moran, a tough umpire. One day when the catcher threw the ball to catch a runner sliding into second base, the manager did not hear the umpire's call of the play. He rushed out to the umpire impatiently. "Well," he asked, "Is he safe or is he out?" Moran gave the manager a withering look. "Until I call 'em," he snapped, "they ain't nothing." And to a certain degree, this is true of much of life. Until you call 'em, they ain't nothing. Each of us, to a large extent, calls the safes and outs in our own experience, and as you call them, you'll see them.

Some time ago, I overheard two persons discussing a serious problem our country is facing. One said to the other, "It's all caused by the Communists." The person who made the statement had done no research on the matter. He had no evidence at all to back up his statement. And he wouldn't listen to any evidence except that which supported his own opinion. His mind was made up. Now, of course, each person has the right to his own opinion. But lest we become like the Pharisees and commit the unforgivable sin, we had better be at least willing to have a little doubt about some of our opinions and be ready and willing to look at contrary evidence.

What bothered Jesus so much about the Pharisees was that they were always so sure they already had the answers. So they could conclude that his healing of a person was the work of the devil. Since they saw Jesus as the opposition, they believed he was evil and therefore whatever he did had to be evil.

Some others were at least open to the fact that he might be the Messiah and that healing was a sign of God at work.

But what did Jesus mean when he said the Pharisees had committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the unforgivable sin? To put it in the simplest terms, he meant what we have been talking about — being so closed in our minds, so sure of ourselves that we call that which is good, evil. Thus, the Pharisees called the good act of healing a person the work of the devil.

Some sins are due to failure under temptation, or ignorance, or self-worship, or honest doubt, or just plain self-centeredness. People can deny the claims of Christ and question his teaching and still find pardon. But for this kind of willful blindness of calling that which is good, evil, and of not being willing to consider any other possibility, for this, Jesus was saying there is no forgiveness.

Such a person's value system is turned upside down. There is no pardon for this kind of sin because there is no desire for pardon. There is no willingness to even consider that one might be wrong. How can one be forgiven if he or she refuses to recognize the difference between good and evil? This is the essence of fanaticism — to have such a closed mind, such a closed system of thought that one will not listen to any kind of reasoning.

Who among us can always be sure that we know at all times what is the work of God and what is not? God works in many ways, and some of them are often hidden from us. Other works of God can be clearly seen if only we open our eyes, ears, and minds. So we need to be careful not to quickly put a label on some incident. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will render an account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

What then are we to do? Since it's true that we see things as we are and not as they are, we can first be sure that we know as much as possible who we are; we can do our best to recognize that we always see the world, events, all things through our preconceptions, our prejudices, and we need to be willing to examine those notions. We may have to change our way of looking at the world. We may have to change some of our beliefs.

More than anything else, we can be like some of those in the crowd around Jesus that day who were open to new possibilities, open to the fact that we do not know all there is to know, open to the fact that God works in ways that are not always clear to us.