Sunday, June 8, 1997
SEEING AND BELIEVING
Mark 3:20-35

It's not unusual to hear someone say, "If I see it, then I'll believe it." It's based on the old saying, "Seeing is believing." Or as one comedian used to say, "What you see is what you get." However, the opposite is also true: "If you believe it, then you'll see it." In other words, what you believe can determine what you see, just as much as what you see can determine what you believe.

There were those in Jesus' time who believed he was a fraud and a heretic, so when they saw him heal people, they said he did so through the power of the devil. Beginning with the wrong premise, they came to the wrong conclusion.

Many people misunderstood Jesus. Once his ministry got underway, he developed a reputation as a healer as well as an unusual preacher and teacher. The rumor was that he had actually declared to certain individuals that their sins were forgiven, and there were those who believed only God could forgive sins.

He had been known to accept the hospitality of people with less-than-favorable reputations, and he failed to conform to certain respected religious customs. He pushed the boundaries of his time in ways that delighted some and made others indignant. To some, he was a glutton and a winebibber.

Even his family members were confused about what they saw and heard. According to stories in the gospels, they became worried about his emotional balance. One theory that reached his family was that he had gone out of his mind. The gospel of Mark reports that the family members became so concerned that they "went out to restrain him."

So, here we already have two opinions about Jesus: one that he was mentally unbalanced, and the other that he was doing the work of the devil.

Even John the Baptist, who had baptized Jesus and was his advance agent, had his questions about the authenticity of Jesus. When John was in prison, he had second thoughts. So, he sent some of his followers to ask Jesus, "Are you God's chosen one, or shall we look for another?" What John saw and heard about Jesus had come into conflict with what he believed the Messiah should do and be.

The speculation continues even today. There are those who maintain that he was the leader of a peasant rebellion; others say he was a Jewish version of a Stoic philosopher; others believe he was a liberal social reformer. Some have speculated that he was a model of an entrepreneurial leader or a charismatic itinerant rabbi. I even heard one theory that he set up the whole crucifixion-resurrection scenario but secretly escaped to die of old age in India.

Jesus was not surprised that people would speculate about him and his ministry. It's always a good idea to test what we see and what we believe. It's possible to be a Christian and a skeptic at the same time. F. Scott Fitzgerald is quoted as saying, "The test of a first-class mind is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the head at the same time and still be able to function."

The real danger, as Jesus pointed out, is becoming so dogmatic in our certainty that we confuse good with evil and are unwilling to consider any other option. Some of Jesus' critics maintained that when he healed people — when he did something that was good — it was because he was using the power of evil.

Jesus called this "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit." Here are his words as quoted in Mark's gospel: "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin."

How could it happen that when Jesus healed someone, one group of people was open enough to at least consider that it might be a sign of God at work, while another group saw the same act as the power of evil at work?

It has been said that we do not see things as they are, but as we are. Our mood, our education, our training, our worldview, our past experiences, our prejudices, our dislikes — all these things and more help condition the way in which we see things and interpret events. They condition our 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 for some time. A Republican administration was in power. The officer, being a Republican, did not blame the administration but other factors. A few years later, I attended the same company's annual meeting, and the same officer was making his report. The stock market was again down, but this time a Democratic administration was in office, and he reported that the reasons for the down market were the policies of this administration. Then, when the market went up under the same administration, I don't know who got the credit, but it probably wasn't that administration.

What we believe, our past experiences, our education, and our upbringing all influence the way in which we see and interpret events. As someone said, "Where you stand depends upon where you sit."

Reinhold Niebuhr, a parish minister and later a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, often told a story of two older parishioners who were members of the congregation he served in Detroit. One, a millionaire, was utterly convinced that his wealth had come about because of his righteousness. It was God's reward. This man had always tithed by giving at least 10% of his income to the church. Another member, also in his 70s, who had given interest-free loans and credit to industrial workers who had lost their jobs in the Depression, died a broken and bankrupt man. Why was one person so successful and the other not? Was God punishing one and rewarding the other? Niebuhr was always skeptical of such assumptions. After all, didn't Jesus say, "God makes the sun to shine on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust."

Jesus was not bothered by sincere skepticism; he welcomed it. He knew that uncertainty is built into all of life. It's part of life's adventure. Without uncertainty, which forms the basis for curiosity, we would never experience the joy of making new discoveries. As far as our Christian faith is concerned, the lack of certitude about the nature of God may actually represent a healthy respect for the danger of substituting human form for the Holy One. God can never be totally described or experienced. There is always more to God than we can see or know at any one time. There is mystery.

But Jesus was upset with those who saw him heal people, do good, and then say with complete certainty that it was being done through the power of evil. They were not willing to question their assumptions. They were sure 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 could not admit that God might work in ways outside their boundaries. As far as they were concerned, God worked only through the channels that they approved.

The other night I saw a television program about an individual who was having some success at curing people who stuttered. He worked with their breathing and concentration over a several-day period. However, the program did not have the official approval of a group of certified speech therapists, and they said that what he was doing couldn't work.

A team of Stanford psychologists raised batches of kittens in a controlled laboratory setting. Some were brought up seeing only vertical stripes, and another group was raised 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 a belief — their brains actually recorded the impressions that way. The horizontal stripers could not see the vertical world and vice versa. In 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 tells what they see. The fact that individuals see different things in the same blots is not surprising. And what we see reveals 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 different things. One will see more animals, and the other more plants.

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, crazy, or out of touch with reality. But much of what we call reality is made up of 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" has too much invested in the old way of seeing things.

Jesus suggested some new ways of understanding God and human beings and how God works. Not surprisingly, he ran into stiff opposition.

We see what we believe. You've heard someone say about another person, "She always sees the world through rose-colored glasses," meaning that person has a positive outlook, seeing the good in most things more than the bad.

Others see the world in the opposite way — they see primarily the negative and not the positive.

Charlie Moran was a tough baseball 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 Moran and asked, “Is he safe at second or out?” The umpire gave the manager a withering look and said, “Until I call them, they’re nothing.” To a certain degree, that is true of much of life — until you call them, they’re nothing.

What bothered Jesus so much about some of his critics was that they were always sure they already had all the answers. Thus, they quickly concluded that his healing of people was the work of the devil. Since they saw him as the opposition, they believed he was evil, and therefore, whatever he did was evil.

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 that some of his most severe critics were committing “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, an unforgivable sin?” To put it in the simplest terms, he meant what we have been talking about throughout this sermon: being so closed in our minds, so certain, so sure of ourselves that we call that which is good, evil.

How can you experience forgiveness if you can never admit you are wrong? Some sins are due to failure under temptation, ignorance, self-worship, honest doubt, or just plain self-centeredness. But when you are so mixed up and continue to call evil good, and good evil, even though all evidence is to the contrary, there’s not much hope.

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. We have to be cautious sometimes before we put a label on some incident or action. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will render 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 tend to see things as we are and not as they are, we can first be sure that we know as much as possible about who we are. We can do our best to recognize that we tend to see the world, events, and other people through our preconceptions, our biases, and our assumptions. We need to be willing to examine those notions. We might have to change our way of looking at the world. We might have to change some of our beliefs.

Our Christian faith flourishes best not when we insist upon infallibility or inerrancy, but when we are concerned with understanding our faith in relation to the happenings of everyday life and when we are not afraid of some skepticism or doubt.

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 always know all there is to know, and open to the reality that God works in ways that are not always clear to us. Amen.