Book 34

Sunday January 25, 1998

HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY? Luke 4:14-21

In the broadest sense of the term, "seeing" is more than having the physical capability of good eyesight. It has been said for example, that "we do not see things as they are, but we see things as we are." In other words, we see not only with and through our eyes and the signals which the eyes send to the brain for interpretation, but also through our assumptions, our preconceptions, our prejudices and our knowledge of the object we are observing.

A pathologist studying a biopsy of human tissue under a microscope will be able to determine whether or not cancer is present. A person not trained in that field would not even know what to

look for.

Our attitude, our outlook on life also influences what we see and how we interpret it. A pessimist observes life differently than an optimist. If you have a glass half filled with water, some will see it as half full and others as half empty. However recently I learned there is a third choice. You could also see the glass as being too large. When there are clouds in the sky on a sunny day, you can describe it as being partly cloudly or partly sunny.

In our day to day conversation, we use the "eye" and "seeing" as metaphors for understanding or not understanding. We say, "He or she saw the light," meaning that the individual came to a new understanding or fresh awareness. Or we say,

"That person is in the dark on that subject," meaning they do not comprehend. We indicate that we understand what someone is saying to us with the comment, "I see."

In the same way, Jesus used the eye and seeing as metaphors for understanding or not understanding. The prophets in the Old Testament did the same.

According to the story in Luke's gospel, when Jesus began his public ministry with the preaching of a sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, he took as the text for his sermon, several verses from the prophet Isaiah 61:1-2.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has annointed me to preach good news to the

poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Note especially the phrase, "the recovering of sight to the blind." This is primarily the language of metaphor. Jesus had a lot to say about the human eye and the kinds of blindness that can affect us. While it is true that Jesus healed people of physical blindness, he also knew that many of us are blind in other ways. In another part of Luke's gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying, "Your eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light, but when it is not sound, your whole body will suffer." The way you view the world affects the way you act in the world. If you see people as enemies you will

tend to treat them as enemies.

Thus it is not surprising that the healing of individuals who are blind is a familiar one in the gospels. The early church remembered those stories and told them over and over again, not only because of the physical act of healing, but also because they understood the healing of blindness as a metaphor.

In the same way when Jesus said that he had come to "proclaim release to the captives and to let the oppressed go free," these statements were remembered and written down because of their metaphorical power. Most of us are captives and are oppressed in one sense or another.

Clarity of vision is more than being able to see

the world around us with our eyes. It also means possession of knowledge, having understanding and even more important not being afraid of new ways of seeing things, not being afraid to consider new ideas, not being held captive to worn out concepts.

In the Biblical tradition, people who are ignorant of God or refuse to be open to knowing God or who are unwilling to grow in their knowledge and understanding are described as "living in the dark," or as being "blind."

In a similar vein, modern communication theory holds that individuals self-censor or filter their intake of communications so as to shield their beliefs and practices from attack while at the same time they seek out communications and

arguments which support their beliefs and practices. If you tend to be conservative in your political ideas then you will more likely read the books and newspaper columns which are conservative in nature and if you are liberal you will more likely read the books and newspaper columns which are liberal in outlook.

I think Jesus talked about blindness so much because he experienced the fact that many people were blind to the true meaning of his ministry. They were blind to seeing the kind of loving, forgiving God that he was trying to reveal to them. Many of them had a different concept of God and it's not easy to change.

When Jesus finished his first sermon in his hometown synagogue, Luke reports that the people

were amazed at the gracious words which came from his mouth but at the same time they refused to re-examine their assumptions about him. They said, "We knew him as a little boy and watched him grow up. Then he became a carpenter. He's nothing special." They were unwilling to make a reassessment.

My favorite illustration about this kind of blindness which is present in all of us is what George Bernard Shaw said about his tailor. "The only man who behaves sensibly is my tailor. He takes my measurements anew every time he sees me, while all the rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them."

It happens all the time. People form a certain opinion of us in our personal or professional lives

and even though we grow, develop and change, if they are asked to express an opinion of us, are very apt to judge or evaluate us by what they knew of us in an earlier stage of development. Unlike Shaw's tailor, they do not take a new measurement and can be blind to what we have become.

As parents we sometimes fail to take new measurements of our children as they grow and mature. We take physical measurements but not always other kinds. We are tempted to think of them still as children and we are blind to some of the new abilities and habits they have developed both good and bad.

In the same way, children as they grow up can be blind to the fact that their parents continue to

grow, change and mature.

Blindness is widespread. There was a story in the newspaper about a young hispanic woman who had been told at age 15 that she was retarded. She was in prison and had been given an I. Q. test on which the score was computed to be 68. "You are seriously retarded," she was told.

Fortunately, she refused to believe it. She went to see about getting an education, but again was told that she wasn't too bright. Not to be put down, at age 15, she started the third grade. In weeks, she had finished the 8th grade and then sometime later, high school. With scholarships she finished four years of college with a degree in sociology.

Later she carried a 4.0 grade average in graduate school and then began earning a good salary as a social worker with an agency that works to keep young people out of trouble.

"What it proves to me," she said, "is that we have to stop categorizing people. These people made a mistake in judging me. If that happened to me, how many other young people have had the same thing done to them?" To put people into rigid categories and keep them there is a form of blindr

Jesus was the exact opposite. He could see unlimited possibilities in the people he met, potentialities that others could not see and many times possibilities that the individuals could not even see in themselves. That's what all good leaders and teachers still do.

He changed people's lives because of his willingness to take new measurements. Zacchaeus is one of my favorite examples. When Jesus saw him up in the tree, he said, "Come down quickly for I am going to stay at your house today. I want to eat at your table."

It was probably the first time in a long time that anyone had seen anything good in Zacchaeus. Others had seen only a short little man, a tax collector, a cheat, a traitor.

The Bible story does not give us the details of the conversation between Zacchaeus and Jesus when they had dinner together, but we do know that as a result Zaccaeus was on the way to becoming a changed individual. He began to behave according to the best that was in him and

not the worst. He promised to give half his wealth to the poor and also promised that if he had defrauded anyone he would pay it back four times over.

Jesus was not blind to the best in people. He saw possibilities that others did not see in Peter and Andrew, James and John, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, Martha and countless others.

In the same way that Jesus did not judge Zacchaeus by his past, God does not judge us by what God knows of our past, and there are no secrets from God. Like the tailor, God takes a new measurement of each one of us all the time. God does not have the blind spots that we have. With God there are always new beginnings and fresh starts.

Not only are we sometimes blind to seeing the best in others and in ourselves, we can also be blind to the ways in which God works in our lives and in the lives of others. We tend to be especially blind to some of the ways God might be working in and through those we perceive as our enemies. We have a tendency to think that God works only through people who are like us or who think in the same was as we think or belong to the same church.

I'm always searching for new metaphors in thinking and talking about God. A few weeks ago a friend of mine told me about a conversation she had with someone who said to her in talking about God, "The trouble with you is you've never seen a prize-fighter." She asked, "What do you mean?" Her friend said, "You've got the referee

and the trainer mixed. God's not the referee. God's your trainer. God's in your corner working for you, whispering in your ear and wiping your brow and encouraging you to go back into the ring. God's not about judging you." When she reported this conversation to me, it gave me another helpful way of understanding how God works in my life and yours.

It's also possible that some of us are blind to our own faults and weaknesses. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us, "Why do you see the speck that is in another person's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" There's always the temptation to see faults and weaknesses in others but be blind to the same faults and weaknesses in ourselves.

Blindness occurs in every area of life. Twenty years before Louis Pasteur proposed his theory of bacterial disease, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. in the United States and Ignaz Semmelweis in Austria, had suggested that bacteria on doctors' hands caused infection and even death in childbirth and surgery. Both of these men had their idea scorned by their peers.

Most of us are now aware of the suffering and tragedy which the blindness of prejudice has caused through the centuries. The blindness that assumes that people are inferior or superior by reason of the color of their skin or their ethnic background or gender has caused more innocent suffering than almost any other kind.

When Jesus said that God had sent him to pro-

claim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free, these are some of the issues he was talking about.

Half-empty or half-full, maybe the glass is too large; life becomes exciting when we search for other options, when we are open to new ideas and visions, new ways of understanding God and the world. The happiest people I know are those who are not afraid of the unknown, not afraid of new questions, who are open to mystery, who are willing to consider new evidence, who know they do not have a corner on the truth.

I believe God's creation is open and continues to evolve, thus there will always be a need for being willing to see things in new ways. When we do

that we are living according to the image of God in which we were created. Amen.