

Seeing With New Eyes

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Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 12: 28-34)

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' — this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This past week I spent some time preparing for the Music and Arts camp coming up. And the theme for the week is also "Seeing in New Ways," so I went searching for some interesting optical illusions. You should have gotten one of my favorites as you came in. Have you had a chance to look at it? How many black dots are there? Zero! If you look at it kind of maybe from the side you can really see that.

I showed this to somebody earlier in this week, and she started to explain to me how the retina perceives the white dots as too bright and tries to inhibit the input. And, you know, that is really not the point. The point is that it's cool. Right? These dots are there and they aren't there at the same time. It is also a great introduction to a four-week series about seeing ourselves, the world, and God, in new ways. Or to think about how we perceive things, and if we see them at all.

When you take a look at this grid, our mind has a way of perceiving the grid. And that's true of everything we see and we hear and we read. All of our input comes to us through some kind of filters, whether we realize it or not. We all have lenses that we see the world through. Everything your mother ever told you is part of your lens. All the things you heard in Sunday school are part of your lens. The music you listen to, the news you hear, your experiences, your personality, your faith, is all a part of the lens that you see the world through. And we all know that, but we don't often remember that.

We all have a lens, and all of our lenses are different. This is not right or wrong. It's not good or bad. It just is. We perceive things differently. The only danger comes when we forget that we have a lens. When we start thinking that my way of thinking is absolutely the only right way, and if you disagree with me you are dead wrong. Which is to also say your experiences are wrong; your lens is wrong.

On the other hand, when we do recognize that we all see the world through a different lens, we start having a little more humility. To see that I have been shaped in a certain way by my history, and others have valid history, too. And perhaps, if we look together, we might enlarge our lens. We might see the world in a different way.

Today, in the gospel, we have an example of someone who was willing to enlarge his lens. The scribe in this reading was willing to stop and listen and hear what Jesus has to say. And in the end, he could just see in a different way. Let's take a look.

It begins, "*One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another.*" This is nothing new. There has been a lot of disputing going on in Chapter 12. In fact, there has been a lot of disputing going on since Chapter 2. Listen to some of the disputes.

"Some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy!'"

And, again:

"When the scribes saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'"

Again:

"And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.'"

And, again:

"When the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him."

Are you starting to get a picture here? The scribes were not exactly fans of Jesus. When we hear "*One of the scribes came near,*" we naturally think, "Okay. There is going to be a fight." Nothing in Mark's gospel has prepared us for a scribe that will listen to Jesus.

So the scribe arrives, and he says, *“Which commandment is the first of all?”* – which is the most important, which takes priority? Jesus replies, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.”* This is nothing new. This is the way most Jews would have answered that question. It’s like if someone in Minnesota asked, “Which is the number one football team,” you would expect someone to say, “Skol!” Excuse me, all Packer fans.

Jesus gave them the expected answer. It’s known as the Shema, which means, “hear.” *“Hear, O Israel.”* The whole verse from Deuteronomy 6 reads like this:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Any pious, practicing Jews said that two times a day. They know that is the law. They know that it is first. It is the most important commandment. Even the scribes couldn’t disagree Jesus on that one.

But then Jesus goes on. He adds a second commandment from Leviticus 19. In Leviticus it reads:

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

A few verses later it says, *“Love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”* Jesus adds this loving others to loving God. The idea that loving God and neighbors is somehow connected, this was something new. This was something that not everybody would say.

It was the perfect opening for the scribe to go after Jesus, like all the scribes had done. “Why is he saying that?” “Why is he changing things?” Everybody is waiting for him to go after Jesus. But this scribe listens, and considers. And in a break from the expected, he says, *“You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that loving God and loving neighbor is most important.”*

I’ve always wondered what happened when this scribe got back to the scribe office. I wonder if the other scribes ganged up on him and said, “What were you thinking? We’re trying to get rid of that guy!” It can’t have been easy. But he was willing to stop and consider, and perhaps see in a new way.

How willing are we to see old things in a new way? When we hear, *“Love God and love neighbor,”* we say, “Oh, yeah, I know that one. I’ve heard that one a million times.”

But can we, like the scribe, sit back and think, “Yeah, you’re right, Jesus. I will work to connect my love for God to my love for neighbor. I will work to let that love of God flow to me and through me. I will find ways to make that happen. I will work at it.”

This week I was reading an interesting study, a psychological study, called, “*Dehumanized Perception*.”¹ Psychologists at Princeton and Duke universities were studying the part of the brain that allows for social interaction. It’s the part of the brain that engages when we look at another person, as opposed to, say, a wall or a tree. It recognizes that this is a person that I can interact with.

They wanted to see if different emotions would affect that part of the brain, that social interaction part of the brain. So they showed subjects some pictures that would elicit different emotions. For example, they show a firefighter to elicit pride, or someone infirm to elicit pity, or someone rich sitting in their car to elicit envy, or a drug addict in a rundown place to elicit disgust.

They found that, with all these emotions, this social interaction section of the brain engaged during all of these emotions except one, and that was “disgust.” When they showed pictures that elicited disgust, the social interaction center did not respond, which means those people were not seen as human beings. The article said this, “The study found that the neural network involved in social interaction failed to respond to images of drug addicts, the homeless, immigrants, and poor people, and this replicated prior results.”

It is scary, isn’t it, that there are people that we might not even see as human? It’s scary, especially when Jesus says, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” You shall love the neighbor that you don’t see.

Jesus calls us to expand our lens; to be open to seeing more people as neighbor. Love is the lens that Jesus gives us by which to look at the world.

We all see through a lens. We all have experiences and people in our lives that have shaped the way we see the world. Jesus calls us to widen our lens. To see people through the eyes of God, which is to say, to see people through the eyes of love, to actually see them. To love them, as God loves all, without requirement, without question. To simply love.

The scribe was willing to see with new eyes. May the same be said of us.

Amen.

¹ “A Brain’s Failure to Appreciate Others May Permit Human Atrocities,” Duke Today, December 14, 2011, <https://today.duke.edu/2011/12/dehumanize>, accessed 8/11/18.