

The Secret of Seeing

Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration Sunday, (March 6) 2011

Kyle Childress

Annie Dillard has a wonderful essay from years ago called “Seeing” in which she tells of a book about people who had vision problems from birth due to cataracts. In adulthood, these patients had surgery which removed the cataracts, therefore giving them the ability to see. But since they had the cataracts since birth they had no perception as to what was going on once they could see. Their preconceived notions of the world were suddenly challenged with this new world with its colors, objects, and distances. It took a long time for some of them to adjust and learn to see, while others preferred to close their eyes and continue on as if they had never had the cataracts removed.

Learning to see in new ways is one of the most difficult tasks of life and it is certainly true of the Christian life. Old habits of selective vision, old beliefs about what’s important, old choices about what to leave out and what’s important tend to dominate our seeing, even while we look for new ways that are in closer communion with the life of the Spirit. Today’s scripture readings are about how the Transfiguration is also about transformation of vision.

Peter, James, and John go with Jesus up the mountain. Already we know that something unusual is about to happen. In the Bible, mountains are holy places, places close to God, places of revelation and transformation. While they are on the mountain, suddenly Jesus is transfigured, a word which means that an

extraordinary brightness shone from within him transforming all that he was. Matthew says, “His face shone like the sun.” Then Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah, representing the prophets, appear and consult with Jesus. Peter pipes up, interrupting them, “This is great. Let me build three shelters so we all can stay here awhile.” But before he could finish his interruption, a cloud covered them all, and a voice from within the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son! (same thing that was heard at Jesus’ baptism) Listen to him!” With that, the disciples fell on their faces in awe and fear.

There is a lot going on in this story but among them is that the disciples, for a brief, shining moment, see Jesus as he really is. And this brief shining moment is the beginning of them learning to see everything else differently. Now it takes awhile for them to see differently, like the people with their cataracts removed after a lifetime of blindness. For the disciples, it will take the Cross, the Resurrection, Pentecost, and the rest of their lives for them to live into this new vision. But this is the beginning, so that by the light of Jesus, they see, not only Jesus, but they will see everything in a new way.

Christian Wiman, poet and critic and editor of Poetry magazine, who has described his coming to Christianity as “color slowly aching into things, the world becoming brilliantly, abradingly alive,” has a poem called “From a Window” in which he says, he was unable to believe in anything but the “truth of grieving.” It was his only truth; it was how he saw everything. It was normal; old habit. But he looks outside at a tree and in a moment it is as if leaves hidden inside the seemingly barren tree suddenly take flight. He feels like he is seeing the spirit of the tree, like he can see beyond it.

And even though he knows that the tree is just a tree, and it was simply birds taking flight, the event changes his perception. He sees that more is going on, that the world is fuller, more real, endowed with some “excess of life.” His understanding has been transfigured. He now sees that his life is connected to the holy.

For Wiman, it was seeing birds fly from a tree. For Peter it was seeing Jesus transfigured. For both, they no longer could see the same again. Perhaps it was provisional, it was momentary, fragmentary but the light they saw began to lead them toward more light.

My guess is that you’ve had moments like that sometime in your life. Maybe it was something small and mundane, just a little glimmer of light that has led you to greater light ever since. Or perhaps it was loud and dramatic and bright that has been a beacon for you. But like Annie Dillard said, “I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam.”

This is what Dillard called the “secret of seeing.” It is to put ourselves in the beam of light and allow it to show us the way.

Michael Jenkins is the president of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. He remembers one day after worship in the small rural church in which he grew up, and where his parents are active members to this day, when he was a little boy and was walking to the car with his parents, he asked his mother about a verse of Scripture. What has stayed with him these 50 years later is not only that she gave him an answer and but that she was able to bridge the mundane and theological in such a natural way. The two of them took their time and read the Bible verse in the context of the whole passage of Scripture and she showed him how the context

made the verse make sense. Jinkins said he learned that day that we learn best those things that require some unraveling, and that something that is hard and takes work to figure out stays with us better and longer than something easily understood. It was a simple act with his mother but he has never gotten over it. It shaped him and formed how he has seen the Christian faith ever since. It was a moment when a small glimmer of the light has ended up shining the way for him (from *The Christian Century*, Feb. 22, 2011).

This Wednesday begins Lent and for the Sundays of Lent we'll be hearing briefly from some of you as you share a story of one of those formative moments in your life; one of those times when there was some light that has led you ever since. What has been the secret of seeing for you?

In March of 1958, the Catholic monk and writer Thomas Merton was in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. He wrote in his journal:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers...

We are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God...

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. ... As

if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun (from Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander).

Merton called this experience an epiphany. It was a moment of unveiling for him and it changed his life from that time forward. Before he had been a cloistered monk who wrote some books; after this, while still remaining a monk, he wrote more and more about peace and justice and the things of Christ in the world. That transfiguring moment engaged him with the world. Merton specifically used the same language, the same phrase to describe the people he saw as Matthew uses in describing Jesus at the Transfiguration: “shining like the sun.” Because he saw people shining like the sun in Christ, it changed how he saw everything.

I pray for you to continue to learn to see with new vision. May you see the people around you, imperfect, different, and even frustrating to you, but shining as the sun. And may you go out the door this morning to see people and God’s creation, shining as the sun.

Amen and amen.