

23rd Sunday after Pentecost B
Church of the Advent
October 28, 2018

Seeing and Believing

How many times have you heard the phrase *seeing is believing*? I always thought of it as an old saying that came out of the school of common sense that described our human preference for wanting to see some evidence or proof needed to overcome our skepticism about something we have been told about, but perceive would be otherwise impossible to accept. Sometimes the need to *see something with our own eyes*, is necessary to comprehend the magnitude or extraordinary wonder of a thing that no photograph or written description can fully capture: the Grand Canyon, for example, or the landfall of a Cat 4 hurricane.

It might be something more cultural and fleeting, like seeing a picture of that winning lottery ticket to be convinced that an ordinary person really is going to win a billion dollars. Other times it might be more personal, like seeing a newborn for the first time and really believing that infant was so recently living inside of another human being. Believe it or not, *seeing is believing* is more than a meme; it is actually a subject of volumes written in psychology and philosophy and neurology on perception and the way the brain functions. Some people take this phrase very seriously. Me for one.

I am what some would call a visual learner. I realized this long ago in medical school, where the first two years consist of continuous classroom lectures, for about 6-8 hours per day, designed to create some comprehension of hours more of daily reading in a wide range of basic science subjects. The primary goal of these two years are for the medical student to memorize as much information as possible, some of it even useful--endless facts, names, formulas and connections between how the body functions normally and how it behaves when diseased--without ever *seeing* any of it--and then regurgitating it all back in the form of multiple choice tests. As you might imagine, this was challenging for someone like me, who majored in Political Science and Philosophy, where everything was learned by discussing, debating, and applying ideas and concepts to the real world with context and understanding. The first two years of medical school were easy for those with keen memorization skills who could remember

whatever they had read or been told without necessarily understanding any of it. Not so much for me. Then everything flipped.

The third and fourth years of medical school were all clinical. From day one of the third year we were in the hospital, and occasionally in a clinic, seeing real patients. For the first time I could *see* the relevance of that memorized information, because I could *see* the effect disease had on real people, and I could *see* the impact of the practice of medicine in people's lives. Once I saw a person confused by hypercalcemia, or suffering a heart attack or giving birth, I *believed* what I had been trying to learn from lectures and books, and I never forgot it. I was in my element, because medicine became about people, and not just dump truck loads of unconnected scientific facts; incidentally, those star memorizers who left me in the dirt those first two years became lost when they had to learn by relating to people.

In today's story of the healing of Blind Bartimaeus from the Gospel of Mark, *seeing is believing* is offered in a context of place and time and the work of God in the world through the ministry of Jesus. Bartimaeus was not the *first* blind man who received sight by gaining the attention of Jesus. Earlier in Mark, the blind man of Bethsaida had been brought before Jesus by others, shortly after Jesus had fed 4000 with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish, and before he took the disciples up the mountain to experience his transfiguration. In Bethsaida others had begged Jesus to touch the blind man--who was not given a name; but before he did, he took the man away from the crowd, out of the village. Then he spit onto his fingers and pressed them over the blind man's eyes. When he asked him what he could then see, the man said he saw people, but they looked like trees walking, so he laid his hands on his eyes again, after which the man could see everything clearly. Then Jesus sent him away and told him to avoid the village, as this healing act was not meant for public consumption.

By the time Jesus was confronted down the road by Bartimaeus outside the walls of Jericho, he had repeatedly told the disciples what his ministry was all about--that he would suffer and die and rise again in three days--and that for them to be part of that ministry they would have to be prepared to travel that road of suffering with him, always taking a place at the end of the line. The disciples had received this information like those who need to *see* in order to *believe*.

Peter had rebuked him, and the sons of Zebedee had jockeyed for his right and left hand over all the others. Some had complained that they witnessed imposters casting out demons in the name of Jesus, and others had discouraged little children from getting too close to the Teacher. They were astounded when Jesus told the rich young man that he needed to give away all of his possessions to follow them. And then outside of Jericho, on the way to Jerusalem, when they heard Blind Bartimaeus calling out from his place of begging in the dirt, they told him to shut up. They had not yet seen enough to believe what Jesus was about.

Bartimaeus the blind beggar had a different take on seeing and believing. He couldn't *see*, but it seems that he *believed* what he had heard about Jesus of Nazareth. His shouting came from a place between great hope and nothing to lose: *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!* Attempts to quiet him made him shout all the louder, until Jesus heard him and called for him to come closer. Bartimaeus *threw* off his cloak, probably the only protection he had from the world, *sprang* up and came to Jesus, asking to *see*. And he did, and then with his whole life transformed by his faith, he began to follow Jesus--presumably all the way to Jerusalem. For Bartimaeus, *believing was seeing*.

This story offers a challenging lesson for someone like me, who wants to place the *seeing* before the *believing*. After all, that stance has always served me well by holding up my illusion of control. If I don't have to believe what I cannot see myself--which may be way up the road from my field of vision--then I don't have to step out on faith, throw off my cloak or risk being told to shut up by everyone around me. I can choose to sit in the dirt as a blind beggar, perhaps missing out on many things life has to offer, but safe from the responsibilities of belief. As long as I demand that someone "show me first" then I can hold my belief in reserve at a comfortable arm's length, and go about my business as I see fit in the ways that serve me best.

But if *believing* comes before *seeing*, as it seems this gospel story might be trying to show us, then no matter where our belief calls us as God's beloved--even if all the way to Jerusalem--we can be assured that Jesus will hear us crying out over those who would silence us, lay his hands upon our blindness, and open us up to a vision of God's kingdom that is full of light and meaning and purpose and joy--enough to compensate for the sacrifices we are called to as

followers of the God of love. If stepping out in faith, even when we cannot always *see* where we it might lead us, is what comes *first* when we want to follow Jesus, then we can at least stop waiting for the ideal circumstances, or a secure picture of expected outcome, to get us up out of the dirt and to cry out for the Son of David to have mercy. Belief first assures us that God *hears and sees us*, and that he will answer us with mercy, even when all the voices around us try to silence ours.

This message is not just important for individual believers; it is important for communities of faith. This is an important day of celebration for this parish. Stewardship Sunday should not be seen just as a day when promises are made or budgets are set, but a day that a church stands up together and answers the call from Jesus to come to him. This gathering of Christian souls may not be able to *see* perfectly into the future to what lies ahead of us, but we can stand up in faith--in *belief*--together, and throw in our spiritual and material support for one another for the journey. Because we know that no matter what the road looks like--behind or ahead--that in spite of our impossible longing to always see around each next curve, we *believe* that Jesus is standing just ahead to show us the way, and is waiting for us to follow. Amen.