

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Isaiah 35:1-6a, OT 663
James 2:14-17, NT p. 229
Mark 7:31-37; 8:22-26, NT p. 42

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23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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“What do you see?”

I’ve just come back from a most beautiful part of the country. Ever since my husband and I used to hike and even backpack in Grand Teton National Park when we were in our 20s (don’t ask how long ago that was!), I’ve wanted to see Glacier National Park. As the glaciers began to melt more quickly, it moved to the top of my list. This summer, finally, I was able to go. Six days of hiking in wilderness splendor – no email, no cell phone access, no worries about either family or church, great weather, a real bed at night and a real shower in the morning – I’m having withdrawal from that kind of luxury wilderness experience.

What did I see and hear? The beauty of nature – sounds of waterfalls and creeks still running at the end of August. Flowers in bloom and in seed, and the sweet taste of thimbleberries. Mountain goats and big horn sheep close to the trail, and the bears I never would have seen on the far hillside, if not for the ranger’s telescope. The mountain heights, the depths of canyons, receding Grinnell Glacier and the icy lake at its foot. I had wanted to go there for so long that my eyes and ears and heart were open to the immense beauty of creation.

What did I see and understand? I felt deep gratitude for this part of the world, and for the people who have worked for generations to care for it. The ranger who led the hike to the glacier had been there every summer since 1967. I was reminded of the necessity of wilderness, and felt concern about what we are doing to our world. I also understand better that I am only a small and temporary part of the life of the world, and that I’m not as young as I used to be. What do you see and understand about this world God has given us?

“Can you see anything?” Jesus asked. The blind man looked up, and saw only vague outlines and motion – people like trees, walking. Jesus had taken him away from the crowd, but at least a few people were still around. Someone had led him to Jesus, just as some unknown people had brought the deaf man to Jesus. The people around the deaf man and then the blind man had seen them as valuable persons and had gone out of their way to help.

What do we see and hear and understand? I hope we see the people around us – their beauty, their dignity as persons, their unique characteristics and gifts. I hope we recognize the many ways we have been helped by the efforts of other people. You know, we like to consider ourselves fairly independent, self-sufficient, responsible for our own care. Yet none of us is here entirely on our own efforts. We have had parents and teachers to guide us. We have benefitted from the work of doctors and scientists and inventors we’ll never meet. We are connected to one another by our common sources of electricity and communication and food supply. Maybe we see only vague outlines of these people who help us, and yet because of them, we are able to function as a community.

We also see the people around us who are in need. As our eyes are opened to the problems of others, as our ears are opened to their cries, we can bring them the compassionate healing that Jesus offered. That may be in a practical sense. The current health care reform discussion is in a confusing place right now, but I hope we can agree that something needs to be done. As a society, we have a responsibility to one another, because none of us can go it alone. As we heard from the book of James, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” It is a matter of Christian faith to relieve suffering in whatever way possible. The whole community – local, state, nation – is stronger when people are healthy and have the

necessities of life.

We can bring people the compassion of Christ spiritually, as we welcome them here and provide opportunities for them to use their God-given gifts. We can listen to a neighbor who needs to talk, send a card to encourage a friend, or gently guide a child in a better way. I know some of the men have included one of the neighborhood boys as they've done yard work. As the deaf man's friends were delighted at his healing, so we can delight in growing spiritual health wherever we see it.

What do we see and hear? If we're really paying attention, we see Jesus, opening his arms in welcome to the crowds. We hear him sigh and groan for the pain of those who came to him. We hear his words of compassion – "be opened, be healed." And eventually, we begin to understand who he is and why he has come.

We see Jesus, but not as clearly as we might. Maybe he's still a vague outline, like a walking tree. The details of this healing story and its place in the middle of Mark's gospel hint that it's not just about a blind man who had trouble seeing, or a healer who had trouble healing. The story is also about the disciples, who saw only part of who Jesus was, who understood only part of what he was trying to teach them. That may be how we see him as well.

Jesus is God's presence among us. That's what the disciples didn't quite get. They saw some of who Jesus was – teacher, healer, calmer of storms, multiplier of bread. They would need to see more than that, as Jesus began to lead them toward Jerusalem. As they had traveled once more across the lake, he seemed frustrated with his dense disciples. "Don't you get it? Are your hearts still hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?... Do you not yet understand?" Maybe the deaf man in Gentile territory understood more than the disciples did. Maybe the blind man saw more clearly. Or maybe more is expected of the

disciples, who have been with Jesus all this time.

They don't get it, not yet. But eventually they will. They will see him as I hope we see Jesus, as the living Christ present among us – Savior of the world, welcomer of sinners, Head of the church, peacemaker and bringer of God's true shalom.

What do you see and hear? At this table, we hear the words of Jesus: "take, eat, this is my body which is given for you." Jesus Christ has given his life for us. We hear the words of invitation: "Come to me, all who labor and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." He invites us all to come. At table, Jesus welcomed everyone – the disciples who were trying to understand, but also the doubter, the betrayer, the sinner, the questioner – Jew and Gentile, sinner and saint. We too hear his invitation.

At this table, we see the bread and cup. If our eyes are opened and we see clearly, if our ears are opened and we hear, we will know who offers the bread and the cup. We will trust him for all that we need – for our eyes and ears to be opened to God's grace. Then, like the deaf man's tongue, ours too will be released, and we will speak clearly our praise and thanksgiving for what the Lord has done for us.

This is the table of God's grace. This is the table of Christ's love. This is the table of our thanksgiving. With open hearts, we will celebrate the feast.

Let us pray. Healing Christ, come to us with your healing touch. Open our eyes and ears that we may know you. Open our lips to proclaim your love. Strengthen our hands in service to your people, that we may bring peace to your world. Amen.