

SEEING THINGS  
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King City United Church  
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Do you ever have problems seeing things?

Back when I served in a village church, I recall being embarrassed in my initial days by not being able to see things, specifically to recognize people. On Sunday morning, the men would be there in their Sunday best. Tanned faces from hours in the farm fields and white foreheads from being hidden under baseball caps during the day. Later in the week, however, walking up the street, getting mail in the post office or just hanging out in the hardware store they looked completely different in overalls, plaid shirts, work boots and baseball caps, and I wouldn't recognize them. They were different and they were out of context, at least out of the context in which I was accustomed to see them. And so, as you might have experienced yourself from time to time, I was embarrassed.

I suppose, though, that none of us should be surprised when such things happen, when we see but we don't see. Such events are quite common when we speak about our sense of hearing. Have you ever been in a conversation with a loved one and when you were asked whether you were listening you claimed you heard her but she responded, "I know you heard but you didn't listen." There is a difference between hearing, which is simply perceiving with the ear, and listening, which is attending closely,

to perceive with your mind and heart and soul. Likewise with the sense of sight, sometimes we see but we do not see, we do not truly observe, we do not truly perceive, we do not truly attend to what is seen. There is more to seeing than simply seeing.

The movie *Patch Adams* is the true story of a man, played by Robin Williams, who has a kind of conversion experience while a patient in a psychiatric hospital. He begins to see things more clearly, and his depression and despair are replaced by joy and hope. He decides to become a doctor.

One day while on rounds, the teaching physician and his students come up to a woman on a stretcher in a hospital corridor. She is suffering from neuropathy and skin ulcers caused by diabetes and poor circulation. Clinically and unfeelingly, the doctor reviews the woman's condition. Her rising anxiety is obvious as he speaks.

"Any questions?" the doctor asks the students.

"Yes," Patch Adams replies. Turning to the woman, he asks her with calm and concern in his voice, "What is your name?" Her face lights up as they talk to each other, two spirits touching.

So often, we look people right in the face, but we don't see them. We don't see clearly who they are. So often, we look directly at God's actions in the world and we don't perceive them. We don't see or hear or feel God's presence. We don't see beyond the superficial to something deeper.

The two New Testament lessons for today speak about

seeing more deeply than appearances. The one we heard in Mark is about a blind man who sees who Jesus is even when still blind, and who follows him on the way when his physical sight is restored.<sup>1</sup>

The other one from Ephesians tells us that we ourselves are light, light in the Lord, and so we are to live like the children of light.<sup>2</sup> As Jesus said in Matthew's Gospel, we are to let our light shine into all the world so that the world may see the glory of God.<sup>3</sup> But this is not a natural attribute; no, it is a gift. "Wake up, you sleeper," Paul says, "and rise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light."<sup>4</sup>

What would happen if we took these words seriously? What would happen if we believed, truly believed that Jesus could and would open our eyes and the blindness, the fogginess of vision, the narrowness of view, the lack of depth perception, which has afflicted us from birth would be removed? What would happen if we truly believed that we were children of light, the light of the world shining God's light and love into all the world's darkened corners? What would happen?

## I

We would see things! We would see glorious things, wondrous and wonderful things. Splendid visions would come to our eyes enlightening our lives! We would receive a new vision of God and of God's love and caring, God's purposes and providence. We would see Christ, and our lives would be

changed, transformed, enlivened, filled with joy. And so would the world see us clearly.

I met a woman in hospital once in Lindsay who had just had eye surgery the day before. She had cataracts and for years her vision had been clouded and she couldn't see things. Now with surgery on one eye she could see, she could see things!

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Last night when they removed the bandages I could see the moon. I could see the moon for the first time in a long time. I can't wait to get home so that I can see the birds outside my window that wakened me every morning with their melodies. And I really can't wait to get my other eye done."

I was a stranger unknown to her but on she went in exuberant enthusiasm like a child in front of a candy counter with eyes as big as silver dollars and a pocket full to spend. Life was now to be savoured and she was going to relish it all with her new sight.

A few years ago, I was introduced to a program called Wraparound. It deals with troubled families for whom the social service programs have proven ineffective. It takes these families and wraps around them, like the arms of love, a community consisting of social agency workers, but more importantly friends and neighbours, who will work as a team to support the family. One of the working principles of the program is that they do not focus on the problem. They focus on the strengths of the family

and the family members. Instead of asking, what are your needs? What are your problems? They ask, what are your strengths? What do you have going for you? The program insists that we see people differently, that we see them more clearly, that we see the potential for future success rather than the past failures.

Instead of asking why are these people as they are? Whose fault was it? They ask what can we do about it? What can they, with our support, do about it? Where can God's glory be manifest, God's love be incarnated, God's healing be implemented?

If we really believed that Christ could give us, and indeed has already given us, the gift of sight, we would begin to see things, wondrous and joyous things. We would see people as special and full of promise. And we would begin to live differently.

## II

But when we see deeply with insight there is more to see than joys and wonders. What evil we would also behold! For the light makes everything visible revealing even that which lurks in shadowed corners, and it is up to the children of light, Paul says, to expose that evil.

But do we dare? Seeing things differently in the sense of beholding the glories of God all around us is one thing. It is one thing to wax on eloquently about the wonder of life, but it is quite

another to speak boldly and prophetically about what we see which is not good, that which is evil. Do we dare to try to convince others that our vision is clear and reliable, that our vision is right? It's a risky proposition. Look at the opposition Jesus experienced. Some steadfastly kept their eyes closed to what he revealed. After all, he broke the rules of proper religion. He healed on the Sabbath and so they denied the truth of what he showed them. They mistook his good for evil. And we all know where that led him. It led to Calvary, to the cross, to death. And he was the Divine One of God. He was the Light of the World.<sup>5</sup> What about us?

Isn't it rather arrogant to try to influence the course of human events with our vision? Who are we? By what authority do we decide what is best for the human race, or our nation, or our city, or our Church, or our loved ones? Who gives us the right to believe in our own understanding and then to presume to exert our will and influence upon the world? Who are we to play God? Jesus spoke not as others, but with God's authority. But who are you? Who am I? We aren't God.

No, we aren't God, but we are the light of the world. Jesus said so. We are light in the Lord, Paul said, and as children of light we must expose all that contradicts God's love and contravenes God's will, and we must undertake all that is pleasing in God's sight. That is a risk we must take, not in arrogance, but in humility with care and responsibility. If we

truly believed that Christ could and does give us insight and that we do indeed see things differently than others with depth and clarity we would act on that faith - for the sake of others.

### III

And we would see the opportunity to do so. What possibilities and opportunities would meet our glance to share this wonder and joy, to share the love and healing and light of God with those who walk in darkness and shadow!

In the story about the healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus, he is sitting by the roadside. Hearing that Jesus is near he cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Master, let me receive my sight." And it was so.<sup>6</sup>

In another story in John's gospel, the blind man makes no such request yet he is healed all the same. Thus so, in so many other stories when Jesus heals in body or in spirit there has been no request in words. Jesus sees and recognizes the opportunities before him. The work itself called him. The need to be healed cried out without words. Such was his vision, the vision that sees things, the vision which Christ offers us to see opportunity in the occasion.

In 1962, the story of Helen Keller was made into a movie entitled *The Miracle Worker*.<sup>7</sup> Helen was played by a young Patty Duke. Helen Keller had been deprived of her hearing and sight at 19 months by rheumatic fever. At age 7 under the advice of Alexander Graham Bell her parents hired Anne Mansfield Sullivan

to tutor Helen. Helen was an angry, incorrigible, misbehaving, almost uncontrollable child. No one could see the potential in her. No one could see the opportunity, the beauty of her spirit. It seemed hopeless.

But Anne Sullivan didn't see as we see. She saw deeply with insight. In one scene, we find Anne holding Helen's hand. Anne put objects in Helen's hand and then spelled out words with signing so that Helen could feel the symbols with her fingers. But Helen is frustrated. She can't seem to understand. She fights and pulls away but Anne holds on. Then suddenly as if a light has been turned on in the darkness of her mind, she comprehends. Tentatively she spells the name of an object into Anne's hand. Yes, Anne replies. Another word is spelled with affirmation. Then another. Then another. The atmosphere is charged with excitement. In this moment of insight, the world has been opened to Helen Keller. Life now has unlimited possibilities. Her life, which was dark and foreboding, is now full of light and hope and joy. In spite of physical blindness, she has received spiritual insight that has changed her life forever and allowed her to have an incredible impact on the world.

That is the vision which Christ offers us, the vision of opportunities and possibilities limited only by our willingness to respond to them.

#### IV

How is it possible for us to receive new sight?

We need of course intention and cooperation, the will to see. And we need courage, the courage to risk and to dare to act upon and to test our vision.

But most importantly we need the faith to recognize that new sight is not primarily of our own doing. It is God's gift and as we exercise that gift and use it we will see more deeply and perceive what before was invisible.

I heard an interview once about a film chronicling the daily life of an Inuit hunter. The hunter leaves his home to journey the thirty or forty kilometres to the polar sea by sled and dog team. He uses no map or navigation equipment. How does he find his way? He sees things with his feet. By practicing discernment, he sees the invisible. He drags his foot loosely along the snow feeling the minute ridges in the ice underneath left by the ocean's waves. These ridges show him the way to the sea and the way back home. To those with no insight, without that sensitivity, what he does looks like folly. It looks impossible. But the hunter sees things differently. He has insight into the world around him and knows how to read what he perceives.

So it can be for us. Christ opens our eyes and shows us the world through his. He reveals God and God's love for us, and all people. He shows us the way to share that love and thereby to open the eyes of others with a new vision. The Light of the World calls us as the children of light to be beacons of God's love.

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10: 46-52.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 5: 8-14.

<sup>3</sup>Matthew 5: 14-16.

<sup>4</sup>Ephesians 5: 14.

<sup>5</sup> See John 9: 5 in another story of healing of a blind man, John 9: 1-12.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 10: 46-52.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Bancroft played Anne Mansfield Sullivan and won the Oscar for Best Actress. Patty Duke, then 16, won the Oscar for Besting Supporting Actresses.