

Sermon: Seeing Clearly... Text John 4:1-42 January 30, 2022

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Sometimes we see but we do not really see. Preconceptions, past experiences, prejudices....all kinds of things can keep us from seeing clearly.

A while ago my daughter and I were out grocery shopping. The store is next to an LCBO. Outside the LCBO were two scruffy looking men. Stained, unkempt beards. Tattered, dirty clothing. They were looking for money outside the liquor store. I saw them and what I saw was two men looking for money to spend on alcohol.

I assumed, based on some experience, aided by their proximity to the LCBO, that the 2 men were panhandling in order to buy a drink. But while they were still in sight of us the 2 men got excited. They made it to some financial target that they had set for themselves. They had the money they needed. And off they walked, quick step, toward the grocery store, telling each other joyfully that they would not be hungry anymore today. I had seen but not clearly. Assumptions, prior experiences, common narratives had clouded my view in this new moment.

Sometimes familiarity keeps us from seeing. Anthony DeMello, in a book called Awareness, writes of seeing a sparrow. See one the first time and marvel at this tiny miracle of Creation. See a few more and the wonder fades. You have seen a sparrow before. It's no less miraculous and wonderful a creature. But we stop seeing it.

One of the things that is striking in the gospel reading today is how Jesus sees the woman by the well. He sees her with clarity when he might not see her at all.

First, Jesus is in a place where he can encounter her. He goes to Samaria. The Samaritans and the Jews in Jesus time were so divided from one another that when a Jew from Galilee went to Jerusalem, they would usually go far out of their way to circumnavigate Samaria and to avoid contact with its people. But Jesus on this occasion goes into what might be seen as unclean, hostile enemy territory.

And Jesus goes to the well in town and speaks to this woman. This conversation is remarkable. In fact this conversation is the longest conversation in the Gospel narratives

Jesus is a man and by the rules of the day it is a scandal to speak with this woman by the well. Yet Jesus speaks to her with compassion; He sees her humanity, her gender and the social conventions of his time are no barrier to his seeing her fully.

And she is a Samaritan. Her tribal, ethnic, religious identity might well cloud Jesus vision of her, but it does not with Jesus. He sees her clearly

Jesus sees much about her. She comes to the well at noon. Women gathered at the well in the morning, to start the day, to share community. She comes alone, when no one else is there. Jesus sees her isolation and loneliness.

He sees her relationship history. She has had many husbands. We read that she has been married many times and in the history of the interpretation of this text interpreters and commentators have suggested that this woman is a prostitute or has sketchy morals or is a fallen woman... that's not seeing clearly. That's our own biases getting in the way. We are seeing things that are not in the story.

The woman had 5 husbands. She may have been widowed 5 times. She may have been discarded 5 times as men could divorce their wives on a whim.

Her current relationship, not a marriage? It could be a levirate marriage, where she has been taken in by her late husband's brother. Or maybe her living arrangements are about her survival. Without being part of a male household a woman in that day was socially outcast and financially destitute. We have in the history of reading this story, seen this woman in a negative light. Jesus does not. He sees clearly and speaks to this woman, engages in deep conversation about faith and hope.

It's hard to see clearly. Hard to see others with clarity and compassion as Jesus does. So many presumptions, social conventions and social divisions keep us from seeing one another fully.

In this COVID time we are all pretty isolated. We literally cannot see each other. It's hard to really connect. Hard to have meaningful conversations beyond our bubbles or our information silos.

Its winter, Its cold, Its dark. We are shut in by the elements and by a pandemic.

After 2 years of Covid people are anxious and worn down. And the fatigue and the anxiety cloud our vision. Perhaps we have a darker lens that we look through at the moment.

Our lockdown lifts somewhat tomorrow. Spring will come... but it's been hard.

And we seem divided as a society. To be clear, in our community the great majority are vaccinated and abiding by protocols but there are differing points of view, often stridently expressed and sometimes it's hard to see one another's humanity in the midst of intense conversations and social media posts...

I read this week an interview with a grocery worker* who spoke of the challenges that she faces in her work. She said " Customers seem to forget that we're human beings. ... We see their pain, we know what they're going through because we're going through the same thing. We want to serve the community, but it's hard ..." She speaks of being the recipient of anger and anxiety, receiving little kindness in her working day. " Customers seem to forget that we're human beings. ..." Do we fail to see the full humanity in one another in these stressful times.

Henri Nouwen tells an old story in his book *The Wounded Healer*:

“One day a young fugitive, trying to hide himself from the authorities, entered a small village. The people were kind to him and offered him a place to stay. But then soldiers came seeking the fugitive asking where he was hiding and everyone became very fearful.

The soldiers threatened to burn the village to flush out the fugitive unless the young man was handed over to them before dawn. The people went to the parish minister and asked him what was the right thing to do.

The minister, torn between handing over the boy to the enemy or having his village burned, withdrew to his room and read his Bible, hoping to find an answer before dawn.

After many hours, in the early morning his eyes fell on these words: “It is better that one man dies than that the whole people be lost.” Then the minister closed the Bible, called the soldiers and told them where the boy was hidden.

After the soldiers led the fugitive away, there was a feast in the village because the minister’s advice had saved the village. But the minister did not celebrate. Overcome with a deep sadness, he remained in his room.

That night an angel came to him, and asked, “What have you done?” He said: “I handed over the fugitive to the enemy.” Then the angel said: “But don’t you know that you have handed over the Messiah?” “How could I know?” the minister replied anxiously. Then the angel said: “If, instead of reading your Bible, you had visited this young man just once... and looked into his eyes, you would have known.”

Jesus looks into the eyes of the Samaritan woman. He sees her. Gender, ethnicity, religion, old shared prejudices, historic enmity, cultural norms, ancient hatreds... So many things might have clouded his vision. But he sees her. Sees her humanity. Sees her fully and with compassion.

In these challenging times may we be able to see one another as Jesus sees us...

Amen

*TORONTO LIFE JANUARY 27, 2022

<https://torontolife.com/memoir/customers-seem-to-forget-that-were-human-beings-a-grocery-store-cashier-on-working-during-the-current-wave/?fbclid=IwAR1SbpzpPf3rbUmmCgjiEqU5PCSVMIJW4UzofD5DxFsSxykOhK3Yxrcgm6o>