

Epiphany 3c - January 27, 2019

Rev. Seth D Jones

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1-11; Luke 4:11-21

Title: "***I Heard It Through the Grapevine***"

In October of 2015, I was on the internet and a picture showed up of a dress that a woman in Scotland was going to wear to a wedding. The person who posted the picture asked, "Is this dress white and gold, or blue and black?" In the space of a day, this question had racked up millions of views around the world. It created one of the strangest immediate studies in perception in the 21st century. I have included the picture in your bulletin this morning.

How many of you see blue and black?

How many of you see white and gold?

I see white and gold. Kate and Rhiannon see blue and black. It reminds me of an old joke: "If a man is alone in the forest, is he still wrong?"

There is no real scientific explanation for why people see different colors here. It is not a lighting issue, nor is it a failure or lack in people's cognition or processing. I take great comfort that some of the scientists suggest that those who see white and gold have higher functioning pre-frontal and cortex areas of the brain. My guess is those scientists also see white and gold when they look at the picture.

At the very least, after running an international study scientists found that 57% of people see blue and black, and 30% see white and gold. It may be a comfort to those of you who see blue and black to know that the dress, when seen in the wild and up close, is in fact blue and black. Make of that what you will. A very small minority of people can switch back and forth between blue and black and white and gold. Most, however, and me included, see only white and gold or blue and black every time we see it.

What does the white and gold dress have to do with Jesus and our reading today? For a long time, as in decades, I have thought one of the personas Jesus inhabits throughout the Gospels is that of the Trickster. We saw quite a few tricksters in our review of Old Testament women, and it is not a mistake that Jesus takes up some of their activities.

Tricksters take what we perceive as normal situations and flip them over so that we see them, and ourselves, differently. Often, it is hard to perceive why the Trickster is doing this, but the outcome is often unpredictable and even funny. Sometimes it is deadly serious. I think Jesus in the Temple today is doing the work of the Trickster: Taking deadly serious things and confusing our perceptions of meaning, action, and belief. He is showing the people a picture of a blue and

black dress and asking them what they see, knowing some will see white and gold and some will see blue and black.

Rather than sight, the perceptual channel today is hearing. In Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic, which was Jesus' language, the word "to hear" translates as both 'to hear' and 'to obey'. That is interesting, isn't it? In the ancient world, hearing was much more trustworthy than seeing. There was a deep mistrust of writing because seeing was not the most reliable sense, and writing relies on seeing. That is why all of Paul's letters, or decrees from kings, or local announcements would be read out loud to the churches. Most people couldn't read, but reading wasn't trusted anyway, and hearing is what conferred truth and real-ness to anything. Today, it is exactly the opposite: we trust what we see more than what we hear.

Often, we hear what we want or need to hear. My grandmother was almost deaf, and wouldn't use hearing aids. But then she would hear things we never thought she could hear. We called it 'selective hearing'. Sometimes, people come up to me after a sermon and say, "When you said such and such, it really hit home with me." The funny thing about some of those times is that I never said anything like what the person heard. The same thing can happen with seeing as well.

So much of what influences our perceptions of sight and sound and feeling and smell and taste is governed by past experience, conditions of the body, and most of all, our state of mind and what we believe. As one of my teachers used to say, "I'll see it when I believe it." Today, we could say of Jesus' short reading in the Temple, "I'll hear it when I believe it."

Jesus says, "this scripture is fulfilled today in your hearing." He's quoting Isaiah. Here is another funny thing, though. The direct translation of this phrase is "This scripture is fulfilled today in the ears of you." Doesn't that seem like a weird way to say it? Greek and Aramaic were both perfectly capable of expressing two verbs in a single sentence, and we translate it that way in all our translations. But the actual translation should be, 'in the ears of you'.

I know what many of us think. We think, "This should be easy. Isaiah and Jesus are pretty clear here. Bring good news to the poor, release prisoners and captives, give sight to the blind, and let those who are suffering under slavery be free." If this were easy though, there would not be, by some accounts, 33,000 Christian denominations around the world, each one believing a particular truth about Jesus and God, and running with it. I question the number, but it does show that agreement on what Jesus meant is still open for monumental debate.

Because if the Bible were easy to understand you wouldn't have the scene in Nehemiah where the people spend an entire afternoon discussing the Torah, nor would you have multiple interpretations in the Talmud, nor would you have a multiplicity of denominations promoting what Jesus said. And maybe the issue isn't that we all can't get along and we don't agree, maybe agreement isn't the concern.

So I am not going to break down for you today what I think Jesus means by each of these prophecies by Isaiah. Instead, I am going to do what Jesus did all those many years ago - leave you with the open and implied question he leaves the people in the Temple with: What do you think this means?

What I will say is that I think the reason Jesus does this is because he is deliberately forcing people to think about how they perceive, and once you begin to question what you perceive, you begin to wonder what a thing actually means. I mean, you and I can look at a chair. Both of us have an idea of a chair (if you are a follower of Plato), or both of us understand the function of a chair (if you are a follower of Aristotle), we may see that it is made of wood and we may even know what kind of wood. We see the shape of it and we see its placement in the space it occupies. But do we, really? How do I know what you see and what I see are the same thing? Well, the white and gold dress tells us we may very well not be seeing the same thing at all. We only know that what we see together is what we think we see because of what we say to one another.

Language is the universal translator of perception, but that doesn't mean we are seeing or hearing the same thing at all. And maybe that is why scripture is fulfilled in the ears of you, rather than what we are hearing.

Jesus, in his reading of Isaiah, which by the way is an incredibly radical statement from the ancient past and from Jesus' day, is asking powerful questions by saying things the way he says them. He is asking the people in the Temple, and us:

What do you hear?

How do you hear?

What do you think your hearing of this means?

What do you want to hear?

What do you want what you think you heard to mean?

Why do you want that meaning?

Over and over again in Jesus' ministry he will do this. He will throw the statement and the question back and make things infinitely more complex by forcing the questions. We pull phrases from the Bible all the time and act like we know what was meant, but upon closer examination, the meaning is far more powerful, mind-bending, and meaningful than we could ever imagine.

Here are a few sayings we throw around that are meant to create far more questions than answers:

Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's
Turn the other cheek
Spare the rod, spoil the child

I guarantee you, what you think these mean is very, very different than what it actually means. If Scripture is fulfilled in the ears of you, we are in for a very long, powerful discussion about the world and what Christ is doing in it and what we are meant to do with that.

What makes this very hard is we think the kingdom of God means one thing, and once it gets here, we will all see the same thing. But what if that isn't the case at all? What if the kingdom of God depends on the thriving discussion among people in the same place seeing that place each from their own Christ-filled, God-centered, Spirit-empowered point of view, *and each point of view is valid and beautiful and expressive of the Kingdom of God?*

Understanding takes work. This is why, when Nehemiah is preparing to read the Torah to the people, who have never heard it before in this generation, Nehemiah has the Levites, the rabbis, spread out into the crowd. Then Nehemiah read. Then Nehemiah would stop reading. Then the rabbis would interpret what was read. This would mean taking questions from the gathered people. Then they would signal to Nehemiah they were done with that part and move on to the next. The scripture was fulfilled in the ears of them that day. Perhaps the fulfillment was in the gathering, the discussion, the sharing, and the back and forth communication about heavenly things. Understanding leads to belief, belief leads to seeing and hearing, seeing and hearing leads to change, and change leads to action. And maybe it also means there are a multiplicity of perspectives about what it all actually means and looks like and sounds like. Perhaps, that is what the church around the world actually is.

Over the past week and a half, the story of the Covington school boys confronting or being confronted by a Native American elder in Washington DC gives us a very clear example of how perception changes from person to person, how understanding is influenced by what we think we see, and how we build meanings from what we think we are seeing and hearing. In the world and in the church, being confronted with how we perceive and what we believe from what we perceive gives us an incredible opportunity to do things differently, to have the discussion about what is really going on, or maybe the future we would like to see.

What Jesus is doing today is asking the gathered community in the Temple, "What will you do with these things God has given you? How will you be with one another in this new world where God has come to you, rather than you reaching for God? As Mary Oliver, the poet who died this past week would say, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Amen.