

05/18/2014 -- Easter 5A

“The Sense of Sight: Seeing the Way, the Truth and the Life” -- Rev Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Of all our senses, sight is the most encompassing and tied to understanding. We say to one another things like “*seeing is believing*”, or “*I saw it so it must be true*”, or “*I know what I saw*” and such a phrase counts as a “true” statement. We speak of *seeing* as *understanding*. “*Oh, I see now what that means*”. Not, *I feel...*, or *I hear...*, or *I taste...* but “*I see*”.

This makes sense because physiologically the eye takes in huge amounts of information all at once. Light refracts through the lenses and humours of the eye, stimulates chemicals in rods and cones at the back of the eye, generates electrical impulses which are then pushed to the brain. All this happens in millionths and trillionths of a second. Before you are even aware of it, your brain has already filtered, interpreted and made decisions about what is important and then, after all that, sends the signal to pay attention to a particular object. What we are conscious of seeing in any given moment is only a very small portion of what we are actually seeing.

Take a moment and look around the room here. How much do you see? Or rather, how much did you experience simply the act of seeing? It is very hard to “sense” seeing, because we use seeing to label things, to categorize things, to decide things. Seeing, the simple act of looking at a person, thing or environment, is an act of interpretation. *Interpretation* is what we do when we make judgments about things, when we decide *what* something is.

What makes the sense of sight so strange is that what we say we are seeing is not always the same as what we are actually seeing. How do I know the red you see is the same as the red I see? If the brain is making all these decisions without our input, how do we really know what we have seen is what we have really seen? It is a deep and confusing question. This is why police departments have begun to abandon the lineup as a valid form of identification. In the world of detective work, the least reliable sense is sight. It is almost impossible for a person who has experienced a crime or accident to distinguish what they actually saw from what they wanted to see.

Part of the problem is that the brain actually makes stuff up when we see. All of us have a rather large blind spot in our field of vision. It is an empty space about 30 degrees off the center of your vision in each eye. It is the place where the optic nerve connects with the eyeball. This is why our eyes move back and forth when we are looking at things. The brain remembers what is there and fills in that blind spot with previous information, as if painting a picture on an empty space. If it is a familiar environment, the brain will access memory channels to fill in that space. In other words, there is no there there.

This is our blind spot. It is pretty significant. If your reflexes are slow, or if you have been impaired in some way, you will not see what is coming at you from that particular direction. This is why a right or left hook or even a well-timed haymaker is so effective in boxing; the opponent will never see it coming. It is why people get hit in intersections at a 30-40 degree angle. Things disappear into the blind spot.

Jesus says today, “*If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you have known him and you have seen him*” (Jn 14:6-7). Then he says, “*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*”. Jesus is concerned about what we see, physically and spiritually. What we see matters because seeing is so influenced by the models and ideas we are using to understand what we perceive as “*reality*”. So much of what we see is what we want to see rather than what is actually there. Or, we will often not see what we don’t want to see. There are experiments done in recent years where, if you give people a task, say, counting the number of times a

group of people pass a basketball back and forth to one another, the observers will completely miss the person in a gorilla outfit dancing through the group passing the basketball back and forth. In other words, when we become very focused on a singular task, we can miss all kinds of visual cues that are happening even within the situation we are observing.

This happens partially by how we model reality in our minds, by how we have been taught to interpret the world. This should be disturbing to us because it means our blind spots are not just physical, but also dependent on what we choose to focus upon in our lives. Physical blind spots become emotional, relational, communal and spiritual blind spots. What we see may not be what is actually present in our world. What is actually present in our world may not be seen because we are focused on other things.

This is part of what happens with Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian faith. He has pointed out the spiritual blind spot of the Jewish authorities, and they are enraged by it. They are so committed to their spiritual model, their spiritual reality, that the only option available to them is the stoning of Stephen. Stephen says to them, *“Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”* The very thing that has defined the faith for the spiritual leaders of Israel has now become the blind spot for them, according to Stephen.

Then Stephen looks into the sky and *sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God*. He tells the authorities what he has seen, and that is all it takes to set them off. The devotion to what they are not seeing, the unwavering reliance on their blind spot, rather than opening up their reality to a larger world leads to Stephen’s stoning.

When he is being stoned, Stephen does an amazing thing; he calls out for the forgiveness of his killers. *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”* and then he falls asleep and dies. Think about this in terms of seeing, in terms of how we see things. The spiritual authorities, based on what they think about what Stephen has seen, stone him to death. Stephen, based on what he has seen as a disciple of Jesus and what he has seen in his vision from heaven, forgives those who would kill him. One’s seeing leads to death; another’s seeing leads to love and forgiveness.

Spiritual blind spots are dangerous. It is in our spiritual best interest to become aware of where we are blind to what is actually happening around us. As Christians, we have blind spots. Perhaps they are in the rules of our particular church; maybe they are in our doctrine; or in the judgments we have about others; or in the rituals we have developed for worship; or maybe in the categories we have created to determine the spiritual advancement of ourselves and others; or maybe it is in the past we seek to recreate without reflection and critique. The more we build on our blind spots, the more *like* reality they become, even though they are an illusion - like driving into a tunnel in Boston or New York City. There, the walls become solid and closed. We cannot see beyond them. Everyone in our tunnel is going the same direction. If you are the one who steps out and tells everyone that there is another tunnel, or that this tunnel is going in the wrong direction, you may very well incur the wrath of those around you. By calling out the blind spots, you may share in Stephen’s martyrdom.

As with normal seeing, it can be difficult to overcome our spiritual blind spot without making stuff up to compensate for it. In the military, particularly for special forces, such as the Seals and Rangers, and in police groups, particularly SWAT and hostage extraction teams, they are trained to look at a situation in such a way that they do not have to focus their sight and instead take in the full picture all at once. This way, they can quickly look and then tell you how many people they are dealing with. It is a martial arts technique called “soft eyes”, and it is a

very different way of seeing which allows them to see beyond and through their blind spots. But before we ever get to the point of training ourselves to see beyond our blind spots, we have to acknowledge we have blind spots. Once we acknowledge it, we have to be willing to do something about it.

Jesus says, "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*"

The traditional interpretation says this verse is about other people, people who do not believe, but should. The problem with the traditional interpretation is that it has no relationship to the context of the verse itself. Isn't he talking to and about the disciples, you and I? This is a spiritual blind spot for us. If we go with the traditional interpretation, we don't have to deal with the choices we have made in our lives of faith. If we make it about other people, we don't have to deal with our own spiritual blind spots. *I am the way, the truth and the life* is all about **us** and how **we** are to follow Jesus. It is not about other people. It is not about big T Truth - it is about *your truth. It really is all about you.*

We need to accept that we have blind spots. The eye has a big one, which the brain fills in with a very well constructed painting that looks like the real world, but isn't. It seems likely that if this is true in our physical vision, it is also true at every level of our being. Once we have accepted that, we need to decide if we care enough to do something about our blind spots.

The way we overcome blind spots is Jesus' way. *I am the way*, Jesus says. Spiritually, we must allow Jesus to become our model of reality. Not for other people, but for each of us. Jesus' **way** becomes our way, just as it did for Stephen. We can see that through the love God has for us through Jesus Christ, Jesus' way is a way of forgiveness and love - your own forgiveness and the forgiveness and love of others.

When Stephen calls out the blind spot of the spiritual leaders, he is granted a vision of *the Truth* - that Jesus is the foundation and definition of reality itself. Truth is a multifaceted and broad idea. As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13, *We see through a glass, darkly. Now we know only in part, soon we will know in full. We do not know everything. Once we acknowledge we have blind spots, we acknowledge we do not have a full understanding of the truth. We know we do not know. What little we do know of the truth is because of what we know about Jesus Christ. We want to know God and most of us around the world, I believe, have some idea of God. God is the Truth, but how we know the truth is not complete. We know what we know because God chooses to reveal it to us through the perceptions of these broken vessels of mind, spirit, soul and body. But when we acknowledge our blind spots spiritually, we choose to let God be the fullness of reality for us. We choose to let God be the truth and show us the truth. We, you and I, see the truth in Jesus Christ and what Jesus did for us according the everlasting love God has for all creation. I am the Truth, Jesus says, because you, as my disciples, have chosen to align your perception of reality with me. Let me be your truth.*"

The Life we have in the Way we have chosen and in the Truth of the foundation of our reality is, as we said last week, abundant, because we know it is given by God through Jesus Christ. Living fully into the life we have been given is a conscious act that requires a daily commitment to the source of that life. We must, as Peter says, "*long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation - if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good*" (1 Pet 2:2-3). The goodness of the Lord is present when we are following in the Way and Truth which seeks to see beyond and through our spiritual blind spots. We gather here today to say that Jesus Christ is **our** Way and **our** Truth and because we have let him be our vision and sight, we attempt to overcome and no longer be subject to the spiritual blind spots we all have. Here is where our life of faith, fellowship, freedom and hope grows and builds and expands. We know with Stephen, by way of the truth of

Christ, that life is from our shared vision of the glory of God with Jesus Christ at his right hand. We share that life together here, with one another. And in that life we share, Jesus is the way and the truth.

Amen.