

Open Our Eyes

March 19, 2023

I am not a fan of reality TV. But there is a show that I've learned about that intrigues me. It is one of the most-watched reality TV series of the past year. The show is called "Love Is Blind."

The contestants on the show are men and women in their 20s and 30s who are looking for love. Over the course of 10 days, they have the opportunity to interact with one another and determine whom they connect with. They can talk about anything, ask anything, but the amount of time they can interact is somewhat limited.

The catch is that the contestants cannot see whom they are talking to. Each of the 30 contestants living in an individual pod for the 10 days, and they can only communicate through microphones and speakers with the other pods. The contestants cannot meet face-to-face with their love interest until one person proposes and the other person accepts. Only after they are engaged can they see what the other person physically looks like. And then, of course, drama ensues, and they have to navigate meeting one another's families and friends and plan a wedding.

Is it high-brow entertainment that intellectually challenges? No! But it is entertaining. And I think it can be an interesting insight into how much we as humans rely so much on sight and visual input, not only for relationships but for how we interact with the world at large.

Any neurologist can tell you that a large percentage of our brains are geared towards sight and visual input. We have more neurons dedicated to receiving and interpreting visual information than input from the other 4 senses combined. We are visual creatures.

Image Think. "Vision In the Brain: Is it True or False that Vision Rules the Brain?" Accessed March 15, 2023. <https://www.imagethink.net/true-or-false-vision-rules-the-brain/>

And yet we also know that for people who are blind or visually impaired, we can retrain our brains to heighten our other senses. We can learn how to not be so reliant on sight.

Well, today in our Gospel lesson, we hear the story of Jesus healing a man who was born blind. And the ability to see is the focus of the conversation and events that follow. The irony is that the man who was blind can see better than anyone else, because he understands who Jesus is and why Jesus could heal him.

But all the other characters in this story (except Jesus) are blind.

The confusion, the blindness, begins with Jesus' own disciples. They see a blind beggar, and their assumption is that this blindness must be a punishment from God. And that was a prevalent view at the time. If you are suffering, then you must have done something to deserve it. (We never do this today.)

Jesus' response is that no one sinned to cause this. That's not a helpful way of thinking about suffering. And Jesus heals him in a very earthy, tactile way. Jesus takes dirt and spit and rubs it in the man's eyes, and then sends him to wash in a sacred pool. The man is healed! He can see!

Then the blindness continues with the man's neighbors, who now can't recognize him! They say, "Was this the man who used to beg?" showing that they never really looked at the guy. He was just that blind beggar who didn't deserve any attention. And even when the man says, "Yeah, that was me!" they don't listen.

And then we have the religious leaders, who operate from the same assumption of the disciples, that disability is the result of sin. So they question the healed man several times; they question his parents; they even question themselves. And at the end of the day, their own understanding of religion and sin and disability leave them blind to the wonders of God's forgiveness and grace.

As I've mentioned before, our Gospel writer John makes it easy to us to place ourselves in the story. We are Nicodemus; we are the woman at the well. But this week, we have to ask ourselves who we identify with in the story.

Are we the blind man, whose perception of the world has changed, who knows Jesus, who is grateful for the gift he has been given? Or are we the disciples, the neighbors who fail to recognize the healed man, or the Pharisees? Do we miss out on who Jesus is?

I'm reminded of our Eucharistic Prayer that we are using this season: "Open our eyes, Lord, to see your hand at work in the world around us." What prevents us from opening our eyes? What puts blinders on our vision, so that we get so focused on the minutiae of everyday life than we miss the gifts we receive every day?

I know for me, one of the sources of blindness is busy-ness. A dear friend reminded me this week of a quote attributed to Carl Jung: "Busyness is not of the devil. Busyness is the devil." We can get so caught up in completing a task or getting a job done that we forget that every breath we have is a gift from God. We are blind to the wonderful luxuries of life – full stomachs, homes to live in, people who care about us, an earth that sustains us.

Carl Jun. AZ Quotes. Accessed March 17, 2023. <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/860070>.

Another source of blindness that comes up in this story that affects us today is pigeonholing. In the Gospel story, everyone has put that blind man into a role. He's the blind beggar who sits by the gate. He's a sinner. He is not worth my time.

Then when the man is healed, no one knows what to do. It's easier to choose blindness, to keep thinking of him as a sinner or a blind beggar than to believe that this man can be anyone else.

We see it in our Old Testament lesson too. The prophet Samuel is called to anoint a new king over Israel. God tells Samuel that the new king will be one of the sons of this man Jesse. And when Samuel sees Jesse's firstborn, Samuel thinks, "Surely this guy is the king. He is tall and handsome and strong. He just looks like a king." But we then hear the wisdom from God: "The Lord does not see as mortals see; the Lord looks at the heart."

Then, lo and behold, God chooses this runty boy, who is red-faced and has a childish beauty, to be king. And he turns out to be David, the greatest king in the history of Israel.

And we can do the same thing. When we meet someone new, as we talk with them, we try to categorize them. “This is a man or a woman. This person is nice or stand-offish, interesting or dull, pleasant or unpleasant. This person has similar views to me, or very different views.” And then each subsequent interaction we base on what we already know.

Forming opinions or viewpoints about someone is not good or bad; that’s how we operate as social creatures. The trouble comes if we get stuck in our viewpoint and fail to notice any change.

Imagine your good friend gets a drastic haircut. She comes to you and asks the dreaded question, “What do you think?” You might stutter, “It’s... different.” You’re used to your friend looking a certain way, and now you have to adjust your perception of her.

Imagine your friend is blind, and then one day he has an operation and can see. You’d have to change how you think about your friend.

Imagine your relative has very different political viewpoints from yourself. You might be tempted to write off everything she says. But if you do, you fail to hear commonalities, and you might fall into the trap of letting that one part of her identity define how you view her.

Changing our perspective of someone, our understanding of them, takes work. Those neighbors could not wrap their heads about this healed man being anyone other than a blind beggar. They couldn’t reconcile the fact that he could now see. And in doing so, they missed out on this wonderful miracle that Jesus performed, on seeing who Jesus is, and on welcoming this beggar into the fullness of community.

So what can prevent us from seeing the gifts of God? Our busy-ness. And our preconceptions. Can we truly open our eyes to see the wonders that God has for us?

I’ll close with lyrics from a wonderful hymn that invites God to make us more aware. It’s called “Open My Eyes.”

Open my eyes that I may see
glimpses of truth thou hast for me.
Place in my hands the wonderful key
that shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!

Clara H. Scott. “Open My Eyes.” 1985.

Amen.