

Hospitality and Seeing Clearly

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Ruth Boven

Luke 7:36-50

I went to see my optometrist recently to have an eye exam. I don't love eye exams. My apologies to those of you who work in that field. Though, I guess I'd say, I don't dread them as much as dental appointments. Sorry to the many of you in that profession.

You know how it goes, right? The optometrist or an assistant runs a variety of tests so they can figure out what prescription will help you see most clearly. As you likely know, one of the tests has you looking through a binocular type of machine that places different lenses in front of your eyes. The early lenses are often disturbingly fuzzy or distorted as you keep identifying which image is clearer for you, this one or that one. 1 or 2. A or B. I find this part challenging and a little anxiety producing because I so badly want to get it right. I want my prescription to turn out accurately. I want to go about life seeing as clearly as I possibly can.

Last week, when we considered this same story in Luke, we considered the condition or posture of our hearts. Are they closed in evaluation of others or are they open in a humble posture of hospitality? This morning, we look at the same story from a different angle and we consider the condition of our eyes and the way we see. And you and I and the church as whole, we want to get this right. We want to see the world around us and ourselves as rightly, as clearly as we possibly can.

But seeing well, seeing clearly, is something that's actually really hard for us to do. Why? Well because there are all kinds of distorted lenses available to us. They're pushed on us, in fact, every day at school, at work, on social media. One of the things those distorted lenses do, is cause us to see superficially. They allow us to see only the surface of someone, what's immediately apparent about them. Then, what our minds tend to quickly do slide them into a category. We do it all the time. Often unconsciously.

Categories like beautiful, cool, happy, successful, smart, rich, accomplished. And when it's a person who seems a little more on the margins of society, our categories might get labeled with things like poor, different, lazy, loose, weird, looser, sinner. You know, those categories or labels sometimes make us feel better in the moment because there's something nice and tidy about putting things in their proper places in our mind. But Jesus warns that when we do that, we have missed something profound about that person. We have missed seeing them rightly or clearly, and that is to our great loss.

To get at that concern, Jesus asks Simon the Pharisee a really important question. After Simon hears Jesus' parable and reluctantly admits

that “he supposes” that the one who is forgiven much will love much, Jesus turns to the sinful woman and asks Simon: “Do you see this woman?”

The answer, of course, is no. Simon doesn’t see the woman. Not the way Jesus does anyway. And what’s truly sad about Simon’s distorted vision is that while it isn’t good for the woman to be viewed in this way, it also isn’t good for Simon. What Jesus wants Simon to know is that when we see others the way Jesus does, it isn’t only good for them, it’s good for us. It changes us. It shapes us. It forms us into better people, into people who have a greater capacity for joy and love as we build a welcoming community in which God lives by God’s Spirit.

There’s a recent story that’s gone viral about a 4th grade boy who happens to be a huge fan of the University of Tennessee. The students at his elementary school are invited every year, on what’s called college color day, to wear shirts associated with the colors of their favorite college. Though the boy was a huge UT fan, he didn’t actually own a UT t-shirt. So because he so badly wanted to participate, this clever boy made himself one. So on top of just a regular bright orange t-shirt he had in his closet, the boy pinned on a paper sign with the handwritten letters UT on it.

That day, at lunchtime, sitting near him were some girls who I’m pretty sure were wearing distorted lenses in their glasses, because they proceeded to mock and tease the boy for his homemade shirt. His teacher noticed that after lunch he had put his head down the desk and cried.

Well that’s not where the story ends because the teacher was so bothered by what happened that she reached out through social media to see if in some way the University might do something to encourage him. Well, as you may have heard, did they ever! They sent not only a real UT t-shirt they included tons of UT items. They even took his handmade UT logo and printed it up on shirts to sell. As news got out and spread, orders started rolling in and pre-sales of the shirt have reached over 16,000.

As you can imagine, the boy’s mom was a bit overwhelmed but very grateful. Listen to her response “Thank you,” she said, “to Ms. Snyder for taking the time to stand up for her student and for caring enough to do so, thank you to University of Tennessee and everyone involved in sending him the package, thank you to the kind alumni that paid for shipping...and most of all thank you for seeing in my son what we see in him every day.”

How we see others matters. The girls at that lunch table obviously saw the boy differently than his mother. In the same way, Simon the Pharisee saw the sinful woman differently than did Jesus. But what was the difference? How did Jesus see the woman differently than Simon did?

Here’s one way to think about it: Simon, the girls at the lunch table, were seeing from below, with the lenses they’d been given by the world. But there is a different and better way to see.

It’s called seeing from above. It’s about seeing another person first through the lens of having been created by God who carefully knit that

person together in their mother's womb. When we see from above through a clearer lens, what we see first about every single human being is that they are created in the image of God and beloved of God. Despite any other label that might come quickly to mind, the first and most important category or label that belongs to them is "Beloved."

And there's really good news about seeing in this way; for when we see that the deepest and truest thing about another person, though they may be broken by sin, by circumstances, by the cruelty of the world, is that they are beloved of God, we are reminded of our own belovedness. We become more aware that that's the deepest truest thing about ourselves as well. And when that truth gets lived out by us in a community of faith, our capacity for welcome stretches and grows.

Father Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who has served in the poorest, riskiest, most-gang populated parish of the catholic church in the United States. Perhaps you've heard of him. He spoke for Calvin's January Series in 2011. Boyle is well known for the work he's done to help young people caught in the nearly impossible to escape network of gangs in Los Angeles, California.

To talk about all of Boyle's efforts in this area would take much longer than we have. But here's what Boyle does so beautifully, you can read about it in his book, "Tattoos on the Heart." Boyle claims that as he lives out the radical idea that those with whom he works are beloved by God. As he sees them from above, he is more convinced of his own brokenness but also is more convinced that he, himself is God's precious child.

In his book you realize that in many ways Father Gregory, or Father G, or as some of the gang members called him G-dog, has acted as a loving father to these recovering gang members.

I was moved in reading about one of the recovering gang-members named Cesar, whose intimidating size and persona commanded, awed attention from anyone daring to look at him. Cesar liked it that way. In charge. In control. Holding tightly to the benefits his appearance afforded him.

But late one night, about 3am, Boyle receives a phone call from Cesar, who's sober and says it's urgent. "I gotta ask you a question. You know how I've always seen you as my father ever since I was a little kid? Well, I haveta ask ya somethin." Cesar pauses and the gravity of it all makes his voice waver and crumble, "Have I been your son?" "Well, yes, of course you've been my son," says Boyle. "Whew," Cesar exhales, "I thought so." Then mixed with gentle sobbing Cesar says "Then I will be your son. And you will be my father; and nothing will separate us right?" "That's right," answers Boyle. In that early morning call, Boyle reflects, Cesar did not discover that he had a father. He discovered that he was a son worth having.

Boyle says the fact that his life circumstances were not such that he ever had to consider being part of a gang, did not make him morally superior to them. “Quite the opposite,” he writes. “I have come to see with greater clarity that the day simply won’t come when I am more noble, have more courage, or am closer to God than the folks whose lives fill these pages.”

What Cesar needed to know is what we all need to know – that I am, that you are a child worth having. You are a daughter; you are son who is beloved.

Today is the day the Christian Reformed Church thinks about the great value of every person, particularly those who are more vulnerable to abuse within our communities.

The curriculum our denomination uses teaches our children that because they are unique, valued and beloved children of God, they are encouraged to imagine a circle of grace around themselves. That circle is special because they are special to God. And because God is present with them in that circle, it is holy ground; a sacred space. The goal of the curriculum is to empower children to recognize when that circle of grace is being threatened or broken.

This got me thinking. What if, as we strive to see others from above, we too, imagine a circle of grace around them. A holy circle of grace because they bear the image of God and so God is within it. A holy circle of grace that says, this person, despite any other label they’ve ever been given, is first of all “beloved.”

And it’s the same for you. Despite whatever label you’ve ever been given—you are first of all beloved of God and there is a holy circle of grace around you.

Friends, God was born into this world and lifted up on a cross to make it so. And seeing all people from above – he died so that our souls may find their worth. What a true thrill of hope, in which our weary world can rejoice.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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