

Intimacy: Into-Me-See
 “Seeing and Knowing. What Do You Want?”
 Mark 10:46-52

You may not know this, but when I was in college, I considered becoming a minister. Though I didn’t end up pursuing that route, I do feel that much of what I do now professionally is about ministering... bringing together people from a variety of backgrounds, helping young adolescents learn about making a difference, taking care of our community’s youngest and most vulnerable. One thing I miss, though, is the opportunity to reflect on ideas of faith. I’m grateful to Pastor Kathi for the invitation to reflect with you today, for the mentors who have inspired me along the way, and to all of you for your willingness to walk with me for a while with these ideas...

So...seeing, knowing... blindness... open eyes... What does it really mean to see?

I once saw a play about an adult woman living with cerebral palsy. Her movements were stilted and stiff and her speech slurred. In this play, she met a man and the two fell in love. The most moving moment of the play, still with me 25 years later, was when the two attended a community dance together. They had the courage to go out on the dance floor, despite their physical challenges. As the music played, the spotlight shone, and the two actors transformed themselves from their stooped- over, awkwardly moving characters into two graceful partners, dignified and standing tall, moving in unison with the music and with each other. The message was profound. It said, “Inside ourselves, we look like these two graceful beings. Even though our bodies don’t really move this way, in this moment of love and beauty, this is who we are inside, to each other and to ourselves.”

Isn’t that what love is about? The ability to find that dignified beauty, that person worthy of respect who moves beautifully in this world?

Sometimes what we see with our eyes doesn’t actually give us the full picture. Our eyes confuse us, make us jump to conclusions, and we miss the essence of the whole. Think about what you see when you look at these images:

Penguin or man?

Vase or face?

Nadia Bolz-Weber—Minister?

Two moms and child—Family?

Young person with technology—Changemaker?

Costume or Culture—American?

It can be difficult when someone else seems to be making judgements based on something that they see, rather than know about you. Have you ever pushed someone in a wheelchair? If so, have you noticed that as you and your companion approach others, most people won't actually look at the person in the wheelchair? Often, they won't address the person in the wheelchair either, talking instead to the standing person. Perhaps their eyes trick them into focusing on the wheelchair instead of the person in it, making assumptions or feeling uncomfortable.

What does it take to know the full person? How do we move beyond seeing to a more complete understanding of someone else?

Early in my career, I was working in the Boston area, leading gender equity trainings for adults who worked with children. One of the questions that I always asked was: How was life different for girls growing up in your neighborhood than for boys? And I had a follow-up set of questions that helped people to think about the freedom that boys had in comparison to girls, the ways that boys were encouraged in math and science and girls weren't. It was generally an effective way to make my point about changes in science education. And yet, on this occasion, I was speaking with a group of all black-American women living in the city. When I asked my question and gently tried to guide them to my gender equity truth, they pushed back on me. They talked about the challenges that black boys face and about how much more difficult it was then and still is today for African-American boys than for girls. I learned an important lesson that day about how I was stuck in my own view, based on my experiences as a white, middle class woman.

Noticing difference can be hard. Acknowledging difference is often harder. Talking about difference can be especially hard. Many of us were taught that it's not appropriate to mention differences like skin color or socioeconomics or sexual orientation because it might be hurtful or biased. Sometimes, I think this avoidance to talk about difference comes from a good place, from the idea that every person matters. I know that as a white woman growing up in the Midwest of the United States, I was encouraged—by my church, by my parents-- to be colorblind. Everyone is the same—there are no differences. We are all people, worthy of respect, worthy of kindness, worthy of noticing and knowing. Jesus teaches this: even as you do this unto the least of us.... You do this unto me.

But, I know better now. Our differences define us—our ways of being in the world, our beliefs, our ways of living, our ways of following rules, of what we define as 'appropriate,' of what we value, sometimes of what we are able to do or not do. Maybe it's better to actually talk about those differences, those cultural perspectives?

Jesus' response to Bartimaeus in today's Bible story offers a way to help us think about seeing differently and about diversity. In this story, when Jesus hears and sees the blind man, he

doesn't jump to the conclusion that Bartimaeus needs to be healed. Instead, he asks. "What do you want me to do for you?" What is it that you need? How can I help you? What would you like?

Though it may have seemed obvious what a blind man would want, Jesus did not presume. He respected. He said, "Let me know you better. Let me understand you. Let me actually ask you what you need, without assuming that I know." I wonder how many times we are able to do this in our relationships?

How often do we ask ourselves "What can I do to know that person better... to really understand what that person needs or thinks about or who they are inside..."? How often do we take Jesus' lead and connect with others as a way of connecting with God?

In today's political climate, we see a lot of people operating down at one end of a thinking spectrum about culture. This diagram shows a spectrum of ways of thinking about cultures different from our own. Perhaps you know someone who denies that there are cultural differences, or is defensive, thinking that their own cultural way of thinking is the best? As I did back in Boston, some of us minimize differences (kind of like saying that we're all really the same). When we are able to accept that there are differences, we begin to be able to adapt and eventually to integrate different ways of thinking into our views of the world and ways of acting. This model has helped me to be better at recognizing when my judgements about something are really more about being stuck in my own cultural viewpoint. In my work with the Vietnamese community at Children's Discovery Museum, I have been honored and thrilled when staff and advisory committee members say "Jenni, you're more Vietnamese than I am!"

Speaking of ways of being in the world, let me digress for a minute to talk about my dog. To start, I'll just say, our family LOVES our dog, Zeke. He is the greatest—and a very important member of our family. Talk about seeing and knowing—that guy has my morning routine down pat. But, in the world of dogs, he is a bit, well, different from the dogs that I grew up with. First, when you try to touch him on the head, he usually ducks. And when someone he knows and loves comes home, well... he starts the howl. It's a high pitched yipping, really. And then there's the spinning thing. You know, Zeke spent some time living on the street, so maybe that explains it? In general, though, his dog culture is just different from other dogs that I've known. So, after trying things the way that we've known with other dogs, we've realized we just needed some adaptations in our house—when Zekey howls now, we don't panic, we smile. When people come over and want to pet him, we let them know that that ducking is just his way. And when I arrive home and get the happy spinning dance, I feel the surge of love that I think he's feeling too.

One of my favorite books in the world is a book called The Power of One by Bryce Courtenay. It is set in South Africa in the mid-1900s, and if you haven't read it, I highly recommend it.

From it, I learned that a common Zulu greeting is Sawubona, which means, “I see you.” This is the ‘I see you’ that means I want to know you. I acknowledge you. I value you. As community leader Orland Bishop explains “Seeing is a dialogue. When two human beings meet in this gesture, we are obligated to investigate our mutual potential to participate in each other’s lives.”

Perhaps you’ll think about this greeting as you go through your days? Do the seeing that’s really headed toward the ‘knowing.’ Take the time to look past the exterior to the interior, to the things that have shaped and molded that person. Delve deeper to understand where that person is coming from, both in place and spirit, and to what you might do together. Ask a few questions, find out more. Do like Jesus did... Bartimaeus, I see you. Bartimeaus, what do you want me to do for you? Person who is hurting, I see you. Who are you? What can I do for you? Man with clothing that I’m not used to seeing, tell me about yourself. Why do you wear that? What meaning does it have for you? Woman who loves another woman, I see you. How can I help you in your efforts to be treated equally? Daughter who loves technology, I honor you. What can we do together? Son who chooses a different path from my own, I see you. Help me understand what you love. Brother and Sister whose skin and hair and eyes are different from mine, I see you. I want to know more about you, please tell me.

Children of God, we are all here together, in this place, at this time, with this opportunity. Can we learn to talk with each other and understand how we each think, acknowledging that the ways and the places where we grew up have shaped us? Can we really see each other?

As Louis Armstrong sang, “The colors of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky, are also on the faces of the people going by.” Might we all shake hands, say how do you do? And show our love for each other and our commitment to a kind and just God by going deeper, learning more? Might we all honor our common search for dignity and respect, and recognize that the differences make this a richer, more complex and more wonderful world? I hope so. Sawubona. I know so. Amen.