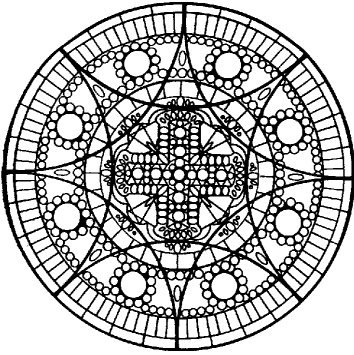


The New England Church Pulpit

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BELIEVING IS SEEING

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Christianity

John 2.1-12

There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee to which Jesus, the mother of Jesus and his disciples had been invited. When the wine was gone, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus told them, "Fill the jars with water," and they filled them to the brim. He said to them, "Draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from, the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Hinduism

Bhagavad Gita 17.3, 17, 28

The faith of everyone accords with their nature. People are made up of faith; as is the faith, so is the person. The threefold austerity of body, speech, and mind, practiced with faith by people of balanced mind, without any expectation of reward, is said to be pure. Without faith, whatever offering or gift is made or work done or penance performed, it is reckoned "not-being" both now and hereafter.

One of the things I enjoy doing in Advent is watching Christmas movies. This year in December I watched the series of Charles Dickens' Scrooge movies in tandem, and then happened on to Tim Allen in "The Santa Clause." In the movie, the adults espouse the philosophy that "seeing is believing," and since they can't see Santa, they believe there is no such thing. The children, however, believe in Santa, insightfully changing the adage to "believing is seeing." Children believe and expect to see Santa. Their expectation becomes reality, and they see Santa. Finally, the adults also believe and begin to see.

As my colleague Emery Percell reminded me years ago:

The philosophy of "believing is seeing" expresses a fundamental principle of human knowledge. Even in the most rigorous scientific analysis, we observe the kinds of things we expect to see. Expectation shapes, and gives parameters to, what we see. Children have not yet learned to expect only what can be seen with the eye. Their world is much larger than the facts.

In the story of the water being turned to wine at the wedding in Cana, Jesus was trying to open the eyes of his disciples to a larger reality. In order to see God's presence in the world, one must believe. The focus of the story before us today is not so much the miracle, but more about Jesus making the bridegroom look good. The people at the party believed that the host saved the best wine until last; they did not know the facts--that Jesus had turned water into wine unbeknown to even the bridegroom. Their childlike belief informed their seeing; their confidence created a truth.

Walt Disney, who saw life from the perspective of a child all of his life, asks the same of every member in the viewing audience. In virtually every movie and cartoon, he asks us to suspend our adult insistence on seeing first in order to believe. When we let our imagination loose, we are rewarded by a truth that is larger than the facts. There is fantasy, of course, but in the fantastic stories, there is truth that helps us re-organize our lives to see courage and hope and love and meaning. Walt Disney has taught us that the world is much more than what we see on a strictly factual basis. Frosty the Snowman, Santa Claus, turning water into wine are not as much fantasy as they are metaphor. Metaphor is the only way human language can point to the truth.

As people of faith, and particularly as a church, we are called upon to see by believing; we are called upon to see our way through whatever the challenge not by the data that indicates failure but by believing it can be done. If we insist that 'seeing is believing' we will believe only in pain and anguish and death. If all we see and hear is darkness and hopelessness, and we cannot believe what we cannot see, then the truth of life will be invisible to us. Adult logic will not always see the truth; belief based only on seeing won't always tell the story.

If, however, we can suspend our seeing and begin to believe in the truth Christ brings, you will find your expectation rewarded, your hope renewed, and life given to you anew. When things look their worst, believe that the best wine is yet to be served. You will see it happen once again. The lame will all walk. The oppressed will all go free. The poor will no longer be poor. Justice and peace and prosperity for all God's children will blossom and grow. It is what Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed of. It is what Rosa Parks did when she wouldn't give up her seat on that bus. They could see only because they believed. Unfortunately in today's world, we seem to have lost our way because the political rhetoric is based too much on seeing and too little on believing.

In James Carse's book *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple*, he imagines finding a lost gospel written by a woman with a different perspective. Here is an encounter with Jesus that is insightful.

Not long afterward, Nathanael led a blind man to Jesus. Jesus spoke directly to the blind man. "I do not have the power to restore your eyes"

You do not understand, rabbi," he said in a whisper, his fingers playing over Jesus' face. "I already see, rabbi. It is the others who do not see."

"Are you not blind, then?"

"Although I was born without eyes, rabbi, I have never lived in darkness. Mine is a world of a thousand dimensions and colors. I hear and smell and touch all that you do but in hues and shapes unknown to anyone else."

As Jesus stared into his empty eye sockets, the man continued:

"Were King Herod to behold what I see for half a day, he would trade all he has for such wealth."

"If you do not suffer," Jesus asked him, "why did you come to be healed?"

"I suffer from the blindness of others. Wherever I go, rabbi, I find those who have never seen but do not know they are sightless. I did not come to you to be healed. It is the seeing who need to be healed."

Seeing by believing is a kind of virtual reality. Virtual reality is a way of seeing today. With the help of computers and electronic imaging, we are able to put things together in patterns that are truth, even if they are not factual. Virtual reality is tricky stuff, but it can help us catch glimpses of truth we could not see with eyes trained only to see the facts.

Listen to another story from *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciples* where believing is seeing.

A master sent three servants to the market with six silver coins apiece, expecting them to use the money cleverly and to bring back something of greater value than the six coins.

One bought a jewel that was worth two times what the merchant thought. "I sold the jewel to another and have come back with twelve coins." The master praised her.

The second brought a goat he discovered was pregnant with two kids. "I felt the belly when the merchant was not looking. He thought I was buying one when I really bought three."

"You, too, have been clever."

The third said, "I lost the coins."

"How could you be such a fool?" the master said

"I came upon a group of itinerant performers. They taught me to dance. The coins must have jumped out of my pocket."

"Jumped out of your pocket? A likely story. How could this have happened?"

"Quite easily," the servant said, "You just put one foot here, touch the other toe there, and turn like this."

Soon the master and third servant were leaping and spinning in frenzied circles.

The first and second servants exclaimed to each other "It is now the master who is a fool."

The master waved them off and continued dancing with the third.

The worries, the facts, the obsession to make money, to be politically savvy, to be first and right at all cost catches us in the trap of believing only what we see. Pray that our powers of believing will be stretched and our mode of expectation inspired, so that, in this violent, stress-filled world, we will see water turned into wine, churches leading the way to the world as God would have it, and rich masters dancing with fools who have lost their money and their heads. Pray that we may believe so that we may see with the eyes of God's love and grace. Amen.

--- Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, before the mountains were brought forth, before the world was formed, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. Even as a thousand-year span in your sight is but yesterday when it is gone, we are ever mindful that our peace is found in the everlasting nature of your being more than in the transient nature of our own.

Grant us the quiet serenity of your peace when our lives are fretful and irritated; visit us in the timelessness of your spirit when we feel separated by those who have gone before us, realizing that your sense of time is beyond the parameters of our limited understanding of hours and years. God of time and beyond time, wrap us in the warmth of your greatness and surround our restlessness, our fears, our grief and our disappointments with your abiding love.

Grant us, in the mystery of life, minds that are open to the possibilities that exist, possibilities that are beyond our comprehension, possibilities that are even beyond the realm of existence according to our finite minds. May we not be so obsessed with answers that we overlook the vitality of relationships; remind us when we are consumed with finding solutions that a simple trust in the power of a holy love is a worthier pursuit.

Grant us the peace that passes all human understanding amid the chaos of our world. Encourage us with the parables that science provides for us that out of disruption and change come the opportunities for growth and new life. Gird us with the truths we find in the natural order of an ever-evolving world that you have given to us to not only enjoy but as a laboratory for faith development.

Grant us the courage to be faithful to the dreams by which the chains of hatred and prejudice are broken. As Martin Luther King had a dream, may we have a dream of a world that looks more like the kingdom of God than the kingdom of principalities and governments, a world where liberty and justice for all is more than just a nice phrase, but a way of life.

And to that end, grant us a day of living at the center of your love for the sake of others. In the name of the Christ, Amen.