

Seeing Clearly
November 22, 2020
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For all the graceful gifts of living, thanks be to God. Thank you, Athena, Belle, Eric, Jared, and Josh.

This is a thanksgiving like none other. Many of us are adhering to public safety protocols this year by having Thanksgiving with only those in our home or pod. No need for navigating crowded grocery stores this year while doing last-minute shopping. No extended family around the dinner table and arguing with Uncle Joe over his outdated political views. Perhaps the saddest part of Thanksgiving 2020 will be no hugs and kisses from those near and dear to us.

With all the restrictions and safety measures we have to adhere to, one would be tempted to say why bother? Why even bother acknowledging Thanksgiving? Let's just let this one pass and then next year we'll have a real blowout celebration big enough to include Thanksgiving 2020 and 2021.

Well, as cynical as I can be, I'm not even going for that. I'm not passing on this Thanksgiving. I may have more to be thankful for this year than any other. For one, I am still alive. Secondly, everyone in my family is still alive and we have dodged the grim statistic of over 252K loved ones taken in this country by COVID-19. A few of my family members have tested positive but they are still alive. That is reason enough to raise my hands and shout glory hallelujah! And I am thankful for this worshipping community and for our pastors, staff, and lay leaders that work hard at helping us stay connected to one another.

We don't need a 20-pound turkey to remind us to be thankful. We don't need cranberry sauce, cornbread dressing and sweet potato or pumpkin pie to remind us to give thanks for one more day in the land of the living. We don't need a dozen people around the table to be reminded that we serve an awesome God.

Psalm 100 which is one of the lectionary texts for today reads,

Give thanks to God, bless God's name. For the LORD is good; God's steadfast love endures forever, and God's faithfulness to all generations. Amen.

While my heart is filled with joy this thanksgiving season, I pray God's peace and comfort upon those 252K families that are struggling this season trying to make sense out of COVID-19 and the toll it has taken on their families. Even if I would choose to gather with my extended family this year, I'm not sure I would have a grand time, because so many hearts are broken, so many are mourning the loss of loved ones. We weep with those who weep this holiday season and some of those who weep are among our own community of faith. We wrap our virtual arms around you.

Please listen to our scripture that comes from the gospel of Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my God, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as **you did not do** it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. For a brief moment, I want to speak from the theme, Seeing Clearly.

I have really poor vision and have worn glasses since I was in second grade. Every waking moment, I have on my glasses. Without them, I cannot see anything clearly. Everything looks fuzzy and ethereal. Without corrective lenses, I am a danger to myself and to others.

While glasses can get many visually impaired people to 20/20 vision, seeing is at times more than a visual exercise. Frequently, we run the risk of moving so fast and having so much on our minds and on our plates, that we don't see what is directly in front of us. How many times have we asked, honey where are the paper towels, or sweetie, where is the flashlight, or where's my lucky Seahawk jersey, or where are the oatmeal raisin cookies, only to be told they are right in front of you? We can be looking right at something and not see it. Sometimes we don't see clearly.

Sometimes we don't see new concepts clearly or see new ways of doing things. In 2021 SFBC will enter a year of discernment. We will have various task forces strategize on how to do ministry differently so to better meet the needs of our community, our members and friends. Yet even before we begin our season of discernment, some are saying I just don't see how it is going to work. Sometimes at first we don't see clearly. Paul said in I Cor. 13 that it seems like we are seeing in a mirror dimly, but eventually we will have clarity as we walk in the way of Jesus.

Our text today is a parable about **seeing clearly and living responsibly**. Here Jesus is sharing a story about the final judgement when all will stand before the Holy One and give an account of how they treated their neighbors. On one side will be those who cared for those in need and on the other side will be those who never saw a need, so of course didn't respond. Or perhaps they saw a need but didn't consider those in need worthy of relief or worthy of their efforts.

What is interesting about this parable is that those who are applauded for their care of the neighbor, did so because it was the right thing to do. They didn't do it for show, or because they would get something in return for their generosity, or because they deemed the person worthy due to their social standing. Those who acted justly did so because, the one in need was a person of worth and dignity. Just being created in the image of God makes us worthy of the best life possible. The caring neighbors gave food, beverages, clothing, welcomed the stranger and made visits because the need was there regardless of the person's social standing, family lineage, or wealth. They saw a need. They met a need.

In fact, those who did the work just because, asked the ruler what are you talking about? We never saw **you** in need and responded. When using the eyes in their head, they didn't see the ruler in need. It is jolting to our sense of wellbeing when we think we should have seen somethings and we didn't. The righteous ones thought they must have missed something. They couldn't recall seeing the ruler in need.

Yet, while we rely on our eyes to see so much of life, we also use our hearts to see things of the spirit. All things are not seen with our human eyes. Somethings require seeing with open hearts and open minds. My friend Dr. Patricia Wilson-Cone calls it seeing with God eyes. We see most clearly when we see with God eyes.

When we see the world with God eyes, we see one another and recognize our responsibility to be our sisters' keeper, our brothers' keeper, and our siblings' keeper.

When we see the world as our community, as the kin-dom of heaven, we see need, passion, injustice, hunger, longing, love, and beauty. When we see community clearly through eyes of love and justice, we are compelled to address systemic issues that keep some people marginalized because of race, gender, class, sexual identity, and immigration status.

For example, I have been appalled at the attempt to disenfranchise BIPOC and throw out their votes two weeks after the election. What makes a person think they can throw out votes for an entire county that includes the city of Detroit that is

78% black? How do you get there? What arrogance? Somebody, make it make sense? The ugliness of racism is up front and center in this post presidential election season. We must see clearly with our human eyes and our God eyes those systemic wrongs, rebuke them, and create new systems of hope and compassion.

Sometimes we look at the biblical text and exegete what is there. What I find equally amazing in this text is what is not there. Those who entered into the realm of God were not judged based on a confession of faith, doctrine or creed. No mention is made of adhering to sabbath codes, tithing, sin, or worship attendance. Sexual fidelity is not even mentioned. What mattered was how one cared for their neighbor. What mattered was living responsibly in community.

One of the major challenges with COVID-19 is getting people to recognize we live in community. Rugged individualism doesn't work with this virus. It doesn't care what the first amendment says. And I don't think the first amendment to the constitution says we have the right not to wear mask, and potentially infect masses of people! We live in community. Wearing a mask never should have been a political statement nor a sign of personal autonomy. Wearing a mask is a sign of respect and caring for one's neighbor.

And according to this text, caring for our neighbors is not something we do on the side, when we get around to it, if we are following the way of Jesus. Caring for our neighbors is everything. It is the way of Jesus. If we neglect step one of caring for one another, the rest doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what creed you've memorized, or how many times a month you show up for worship, or whether it is communion, eucharist, or the Lord's supper. If caring for our neighbor is not first, the rest does not matter.

SFBC in this season of COVID, we are a blessed community. For nine months, we have figured out how to stay in touch with one another. We have grown spiritually and learned new computer skills, new coping skills, and completed a ton of puzzles, Amen! Dr. Fauci says the calvary is on the way. We can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and it is not an oncoming train! The vaccines will be rolled out toward the end of next month. We will meet together again in person next year.

In the meantime, our mandate is to be present to one another and to care for our neighbors.

And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the ruler will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Let us go forth, with clear vision doing justice while serving the whole family of God. Amen