

THESE EYES

Psalm 146
I Timothy 6: 6-19
Luke 16: 19-31

Faith Community
September 30, 2001

Introduction

Graham Greene wrote a wonderful short story about a young budding novelist and his fiancé. They have met in a pub to discuss their future plans. The young man is thrilled that a publisher is interested in publishing his book. He proudly tells his fiancée the great compliment his publisher has given him, "My publisher...said he hadn't read a first novel in the last 10 years which showed such powers of observation."

Just a few tables away from this couple, a group of Japanese men are chattering to each other. As the evening goes on they get a little louder. Most of the time they are speaking Japanese, but frequently they break into English as well.

Meanwhile the young man rambles on about his career as a novelist. When his wife-to-be questions his idea of writing his next novel about St Tropez, because he has never been there, he reminds her of his tremendous ability at observation. They could move there for 6 months while he observes and writes the novel.

The engaged couple pays the bill and as they put on their coats to leave the pub the future bride says, "I wonder what all those Japanese are doing here." "What Japanese?" he answers blankly, "Sometimes you are so evasive."

This young novelist who prided himself on his ability to observe, hadn't even seen the noisy Japanese people who shared the pub with him. At the end of the story, he still doesn't get it.

All of us do that sort of thing. We have selective vision. We see some things clearly, and we miss others all together.

Have you ever hunted for your keys, only to find them on the table in front of you? Or have you been looking so intently at the cell phone as you dial a number that you almost run into the car in front of you? We see and we don't see. We see some things clearly and miss others altogether, even when they are right under our noses.

I

Jesus tries to teach us to see what others don't see. Christians are meant to see things that other people in society miss.

In our culture the focus is on the celebrities. Tom broke up with Nicole. Here's what they have said about each other. Now, who is Nicole seeing? Who's Tom dating?

Or we have whole shows about what celebrities wore to the latest posh party. How much did the dress cost? Who was the designer? Did it look good or not? These things are covered in detail.

Jesus encourages us to look at the people society doesn't see. What is life like to the homeless? How does a young mother get by whose husband has walked out on her and isn't

paying child support? What will be the long-term effects on the family who has lost their mother in the World Trade Center bombing?

And it isn't just the negatives that we are asked to see. Look at the middle-aged doctor who continues to volunteer his abilities at a clinic for people who can't afford medical insurance. See the retired woman who works tirelessly writing letters to congressmen and government officials encouraging U.S. support for the millions of starving children in central Africa.

II

That's what Jesus is getting at in his parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. A rich man dresses in fine clothes, and eats sumptuously every night. Outside his front door lays a man who is in such horrible shape that the dogs come and lick his sores. The poor man would be glad if he could just eat the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table.

Apparently the rich man doesn't even see the pathetic, starving man outside his door. We can understand why he wouldn't want to see him. Imagine how horrible he looked – open sores on his body, so skinny that every rib showed through his pale, thin skin. We've seen pictures of people who have suffered in concentration camps; we know that awful, gaunt, starving look.

But how could the rich man miss him. He goes in and out the door every day. Maybe at first he had to step over him, and found him a disgusting nuisance, but now the poor man seems to have become invisible.

Ironically, the only time the rich man notices the poor beggar is when he, the rich man, is hurting. When the rich man is in hell, looking up from his pain, all of a sudden he notices the poor man who lay at his door. Now that it's to his advantage to see him, the rich man finally notices. In this parable Jesus seems to indicate that not seeing the poor beggar has serious consequences.

The rich man had an alternative to looking away in disgust. Jesus is looking for a more loving, more helpful approach to this poor man. Jesus is looking for compassion.

III

Since the tragedy at the World Trade Center we have seen an enormous turn around in American culture. It seems to have happened instantaneously. Three weeks ago Americans seemed to be so self-centered that they scarcely saw any one else. We had the reputation, especially in this decade, as people who were demanding, fussy, and snobbish. The questions that followed many proposals we heard were, "What will it do for me?" "What will I get out of this?"

Then all of a sudden everything changed. The opposite seemed to be true. Suddenly the question was, "How can I help? Who needs assistance? What can I do?"

We saw people we hadn't seen before – policemen, firemen, nurses, and rescue workers. We now saw people who were injured, and desperately wanted to help.

People representing 60 different nations were in the World Trade Center. In some ways it was a microcosm of the whole world. We saw those people hurting and our hearts went out to them.

We were pulled out of our self-centeredness to other-centeredness. In the midst of this horrible tragedy, that was a blessing. Our eyes were opened. Can we keep these eyes?

IV

What do we miss seeing everyday? In our ordinary lives it is not so much huge tragedies, or dramatic rescues, but people around us who need help. Maybe it is the neighbor who stops over for coffee and talks about her sense of feeling lost and aimless. She's having trouble seeing where the value is in her life.

Perhaps it is the homeless person we see as we drive by, looking for his next meal, and hoping for a warm place to stay. Or the child who needs our attention, or the high school student who wants to talk, or the co-worker who talks to us but seems to have something more he really wants to say.

If we want to see, there are people around us who show us that they are hurting all the time. But if we are too busy, if we go rushing by them, we don't see. In our hurry we focus on the place ahead of us. We miss those in our peripheral vision.

Conclusion

Our world parades before our eyes the glitz and glamour of the celebrities. They will try to keep our attention centered on those trivialities.

But there is another world we don't see so often. It's a subtle world, which includes some people who are considered the least among us. These people are important. In fact, they are so important that Jesus said if we help one of them, it is as if we helped Jesus himself. That's why Jesus encourages us to keep our eyes open. He wants us to see the people others don't see.

In your life – in your situation – who could you see?

Amen.