

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Sermon for Pentecost 17—Lk 15:1-10

LPC, 9/15/13

I'm going to start this sermon with a story about my father. To understand this story you have to know two things about my father. First, my father liked to stay busy. When he just sat for any length of time he got sleepy. Secondly, my father was no clothes horse. He cleaned up pretty nice, but he had a tendency to forget how he was dressed when he got interested in doing something. A frequent trick was to burn holes in his necktie with his soldering iron.

Once, my parents and I went shopping at the local mall: one of these mammoth enclosed areas, like Ohio Valley Mall. My mother and I were going into the fabric store, so my father said he would wait for us in the central sitting area. When my mother and I were done shopping, we returned to the sitting area and didn't see him. Fortunately it wasn't long before we found him just ambling around.

It seems that a mall security guard had told him that he couldn't stay in the sitting area. Evidently he'd fallen asleep and the guard woke him, told him he couldn't do that, and told him to move along. My father was more rumpled than usual that day. When I looked at my father I saw my familiarly disheveled Dad: a brilliant, accomplished, responsible, kind, professional person and family man. The guard had looked at him and seen an old man in rumpled clothes sleeping in a public place. He evidently had assumed from this my father was a vagrant, possibly even a drunk. You can imagine my horror.

People can look at the same object and see different things. We have aphorisms about this concept: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," and "Love is blind." So we know intellectually that people see things differently but tend to be caught off guard when something happens like my experience in the mall.

Our perceptions of course are shaped by our own experience. It may be hard to see something the way someone else sees it when our experiences have been very different from theirs. For example, for many Southerners, the Confederate flag means pride and regional identity. For many African-Americans the Confederate flag means slavery and Jim Crow. One of the hardest things to do is to try to see things the way another sees them, but this is frequently the necessary first step in any kind of constructive relationship.

This is as true about the relationship between God and human beings as it is about the relationships between humans. In order to have a meaningful relationship with God, human beings frequently need to rouse themselves from habitual ways of human thinking, stretch their minds, and try to see things as God sees them. Or, at least, recognize that God's way of seeing is sometimes quite different from human ways of seeing.

Most human beings feel that everyone deserves a chance, maybe even several chances, but after a point, for your own sanity, you have to give up and move on. If you hire someone and they steal from you, you may fire them right away, or you may give them a warning. But if it happens again, you have to sack them.

I'm not saying this is bad. In our world, things have to be this way or there are no standards anywhere. But in these parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin, Jesus is suggesting that this is not the way God works. God gives second and third and fourth and fifth and seventy times seventh chances. Furthermore, God stops at nothing to give humans the chance to get it right themselves. Finally, God is absolutely tickled pink and throws a heavenly party when humans make any progress at all.

To demonstrate how far this is from human experience, let me give some alternate examples that don't involve sheep. My first one is from my experience as a preschool teacher. Say you have 20 students on the playground, and lining up to go back inside you find one is missing. Do you leave the 19 to search for the missing one? No. The smart thing to do is to call an assistant to make the search. Otherwise you'll have 20 missing kids.

Say you've misplaced a priceless bottle of wine. Just when you despair of ever finding it, it turns up in your laundry bin. Do you throw a party and open the bottle for your friends?

Unlike human beings, God does not do cost analyses. God does not see as human see.

Humans see an evil situation as someone else's fault. God sees an evil situation as people failing to share both resources and responsibility.

Humans see ideals as something to enforce. God sees ideals as glimpses of heaven.

Humans see the weak as many things: people to exploit, ignore or pity, or people who need to help themselves. God sees only beloved children.

Humans see sinners as "those people who are doing bad things," and tend to add, "Thank God I don't." God sees sinners as potential saints. And that means all of us.

To further illustrate the teaching that God does not see as humans see, I offer the following story, which was shared by our Bishop with everyone on the diocesan list-serve last week as part of a series of inspirational messages. This is from *Tales of a Magic Monastery*:

I asked an old monk, "How do I get over the habit of judging people?" He answered, "When I was your age, I was wondering where would be the best place to go to pray. Well, I asked Jesus that question. His answer was, 'Why don't you go into the heart of my Father?' So I did. I went into the heart of the Father, and all these years that's where I've prayed. Now I see everyone as my own child. How can I judge anyone?"

God does not see as humans see. Humans see others as separate from themselves and judge them. God sees humans as beloved children and loves them. For our relationship with God to grow, we need to pull ourselves out of our human point of view and try to see more into the heart and mind of God.

God does not see as humans see. Thank God.