

Vision, Denial, and Daring to Be
Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego, CA
October 25, 2009; Proper 25B (RCL)
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*Gracious God,
Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.
Amen.*

Two of our readings this morning have to do with vision – spiritual and physical. In our first lesson Job, to his astonishment, encounters the Lord face-to-face. In agony and searching for answers, Job had earlier demanded such a meeting; he hadn't fully reckoned with the consequences of that request. Job is overwhelmed, awed, terrified. He immediately shifts into confessional mode: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Job's confession doesn't sit well with modern readers. We don't like to see him cowering in this manner. After all, the Lord played a direct role in Job's suffering. At the beginning of the story, the Adversary challenged the Lord, suggesting that Job's piety was directly related to his worldly blessing – take all that away, he charged, and Job's true nature would be revealed. The Lord denied this and allowed the Adversary to take his best shot. Job immediately lost his family, his health, and his wealth. Then, to add insult to injury, three friends arrived and attempted to explain his grievous loss. Their pestering ignorance was as unbearable as Job's other afflictions. So, nearing the end, Job called out directly to the Lord and the Lord responded in person– today's reading depicts that meeting. The fact that Job's fortunes are restored doesn't really satisfy; we're still discomfited by the notion that cosmic whimsy can lead to such a tortured encounter.

But, as always, there is another way to approach the text. Here's the alternative read – when we finally see God face-to-face then all our worldly concerns (even our most cherished concerns) will fall away immediately. Something else will happen in that moment. We'll shift into a new awareness of ourselves as we stand in the direct presence of God. All the questions we've been holding will be forgotten as we instinctively bow before the Creator of all that is. The immensity of God will dwarf us. The presence of God will overwhelm us. The power of God will take our breath away and, indeed, threaten our very life – not because God is evil but because God is awesome. The proper relationship between Creator and creature will be revealed and the creature will be left quivering.

Now I realize that's not a comforting vision but it is biblical. God is not our invisible best friend. God is not the Cosmic Cuddler. God is "totally other" – so

different from us that we cannot imagine relationship apart from God's tempering of self. But here again the biblical witness, in both testaments, is consistent – for reasons unknown, God makes the choice to engage us.

A glimpse of that is given in today's gospel. Think of Jesus as the sacrament of God – the outward and visible sign of our mysteriously engaging deity. As he passes through Jericho, a man without sight senses that his best hope for healing is near. He demands an audience. He seeks mercy, not explanations. He is insistent, pestering, bothersome, irritating. The crowd tries to shout him down but Jesus calls him forth. What do you want me to do for you? Rabbi, let me see again. Go, your faith has made you well. It's so simple. Bartimaeus regains his physical sight (he possessed spiritual sight all along) and he falls in with the others as the entourage leaves town.

Two stories with very different and equally true outcomes. Our God is an awesome God, fearsome and terrifying. Our God is also an engaging God, a healer, the gracious lover of souls. Both descriptions are biblical. As we move now from scriptural consideration to pastoral application, I invite you to keep the both/and nature of God in mind. I want to talk about our blindness and I'm going to do so in a way that I hope is both contradictory and consistent.

The first issue I want to mention is the spiritual blindness known as denial, especially as denial is thought of in the 12-Step movement. Before I get to that, let me first say that many psychologists remind us that denial serves a useful purpose in our inner life; it can hold off awareness with which we're not yet ready to deal. When we gain the capacity to work with disturbing material then we quickly expand our awareness of that material. To put that in poetic and pastoral terms, we might say that God does not reveal what God does not intend to heal.

In the recovery movement, however, denial has more to do with our inability or unwillingness to see how certain attitudes and behaviors can be profoundly damaging to us and to those around us. In this specific sense, denial is a form of sin – it diminishes our humanity and the humanity of others. It makes it impossible for us to live into the Great Commandment; to love God entirely and our neighbor mutually.

The therapy for this type of blindness is humility, a renewed openness to truth, and the willingness to hear the testimony of others, especially in regard to our harmful behaviors. Deep change is always difficult but denial of this sort is ultimately deadly; it kills our spirit, it kills relationships, it kills vocations, and it can quite literally kill us. In the face of this we, with blind Bartimaeus, cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." To admit to our need and ask for help is the first step toward wholeness and holiness.

But now, marking that, I also want to talk about a very different form of spiritual blindness, the other side, if you will. We are sometimes blind to our defects, no

doubt, but I suspect that we are often equally blind to our virtue, to our human capacity, even to our greatness. I'll never forget thinking about this with Walter Capps at UC Santa Barbara in a class on medieval studies. We were discussing the deadly sins and we came to the topic of pride. After Walter offered the church's traditional teaching on pride he paused, truly puzzled, and asked, "Does that sound right to you? Do you think most people think too highly of themselves?" His answer was almost certainly embedded in his question.

Walter was a Lutheran humanist. He was taught that we are saved by grace through faith, that we don't have the power within ourselves to save ourselves, that we stand in need eternally, and he was also convinced that most of us are blind to our upside, to the abilities and capacities that we possess and, sadly, rarely develop.

Nelson Mandela, years later, concurred with Walter. He also believed that we too often undervalue ourselves. As the evil apartheid government of South Africa gave way to governance by and for the people, Mandela addressed his nation, saying, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world... We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone."

One of the ironies of today's homiletical offering is this – the same therapy applied to our first form of spiritual blindness applies to the second as well. In order to see ourselves as we truly are we must be humble, open to the truth, and willing to hear the testimony of others. Other people can see things in us that we can't see. We will never know the fullness of our identity, we'll never understand our full capacity, unless we allow others to share that with us, to tell us not only of our defects but of our greatness too. False humility makes that impossible. True humility calls us into a common search for the whole truth about ourselves and our neighbor and our Lord.

And maybe, just maybe, that describes the central purpose of the church today. Speak the truth in love, our patron advised. Speak the whole truth. Let us see our shortcomings and our unexplored beauty, that hidden and marvelous possibility. May we share both with one another even now, always mindful of and reflecting the healing power of the One who makes us well. I pray, as ever, that I've said these things to you in his most holy name. Amen.