

July 31, 2016
Luke 10:21-24
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“Seeing and Believing”

Good morning! It is good to back with you again. The past 10 days or so have led me to some reflection on the nature of seeing and believing. That is, in part, because of studying this text from the gospel of Luke where Jesus seems to be a little disrespectful of the wise and the intelligent. Although I don't claim to have attained either of those characteristics, wisdom and intelligence are qualities to which I aspire. It may be too late to get there, but I keep plodding on, hoping that if I don't get smart quickly, I can at least become gradually less stupid.

I may also have been contemplating wisdom and intelligence because of the recent national political conventions and American political process generally, where wisdom and intelligence can appear to be in short supply. What I find intriguing about this passage is that Jesus seems to be implying that there are ways of knowing which go beyond information, or simply getting the facts. Getting objective information, or processing the information we get objectively can be difficult or even impossible, not matter how wise or intelligent we think we are. Jesus explains this using the language of “seeing” or being revealed, but he's talking about something besides literal vision. I'm sure you're familiar with the phrase “Seeing is believing.” I take this to mean that we can believe something when we have proof of its physical existence right in front of us. But I think we all know that our physical vision can be fooled because or perception is not entirely objective. Visual images like these are called optical illusions.

Slide identical colors up

Here's an image that is made to fool your eyes. I've warned you in advance that I'm messing with your perception, but I'm going to ask you anyway. See this figure which hinges at the horizon line? The top half is labeled A and the bottom is labeled B. Which of the two parts is darker? A, right? So that means B is lighter? Nope. A and B are the same color. Do you believe me? Take your hand or your arm and cover the horizon line where the two parts come together. Our brains want to make the top half a darker figure in the light, and the bottom a lighter figure in shadow, when you take away what your eye perceives as depth created by shadow, you see that the colors of the two halves is exactly the same.

Slide down

Believing may include seeing, but our eyes can be fooled. It doesn't help that we tend to play fast and loose with the word "believe," as well. A short while ago I asked, "do you believe me?" which roughly means, "do you think I'm telling the truth?" If I add a little word to that question and ask, "Do you believe *in* me?" I want to know if you have confidence in me. But if I ask, "do you believe in Santa Claus?" I want to know if you think Santa exists -- not how confident you are of his abilities. If say, "I don't believe in religious coercion." That probably means I don't *agree* with religious coercion and would not participate in it, even though I know it exists. And if I say, "Can you believe Donald Trump?" That could mean almost anything. See how complicated this gets?

Believing is crucial, but that doesn't mean it's simple. Let's go back to our text. Seventy followers of Jesus have just returned from a mission trip where they were sent ahead to the towns where Jesus intended to go. They were sent with no money and no food; they were sent to share God's peace and to preach and heal in Jesus' name. They were sent to receive hospitality and offer blessing, and if they were not welcomed, they were supposed to shake the dust off their feet and move on. The seventy have just returned to Jesus, overjoyed and excited by their new-found authority over demons -- not to mention having power over snakes and scorpions. Jesus responds with the prayer which begins in verse 21, which praises God and is a gentle reminder to the 70 not to get too caught up in their own abilities. The knowledge which is really important is the

knowledge which cannot be quantified or proved. It is the understanding that God the Father and Jesus the Son have of one another. Compared to the Father and the Son and the knowledge which comes from that relationship, human wisdom doesn't amount to much. In fact, humility may allow us to see more than intelligence does. The confession that we can't see everything, or that our vision may be flawed is closer to wisdom than our bragging about our own accomplishments. It's no coincidence that humanity and humility have a lot in common; they grow out of the same soil: the dirt from which God created us.

And yet, we are more than dirt. We have been given the breath of God's Holy Spirit; the same Spirit in which Jesus rejoices. God chose to be revealed to us in the same dirt from which we are made, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. No wonder there is such a special knowledge between these two. And Jesus pulls his disciples aside and says, "Do you know how fortunate you are? The kings and prophets of Israel who had the most knowledge of God, they didn't get to see and hear what you have seen and heard. I have revealed myself to you -- you have seen and heard me."

I have imagined -- and I bet some of you have too -- what it would be like to meet Jesus. Not only in a spiritual way, but as a real person whom I could see and hear. How many ways would there be to believe? First I'd have to believe in Jesus: that is, believe that Jesus exists. That God took the form of a human being who lived and breathed and ate meals with his friends and got into trouble. I believe in Jesus. Next, I'd need to have confidence in Jesus' abilities. That is, I'd have to believe he is who he says he is: Jesus can heal and forgive and redeem and save. I believe in Jesus. And finally, I'd need to believe Jesus: to trust that what he says is true. I can trust his teaching and the words which I hear.

And then I realized, as you probably have, that as much as I would love to see Jesus -- to reach out and touch an actual person -- that I don't have to have that physical experience in order to believe. Even those people knew Jesus as a physical person still had to make a choice whether or not to believe. Not just the folks in the crowds who heard him preach and saw him heal, but even the disciples who were with him through the final years and weeks and days of his life on

earth. In the gospel of John, after Jesus appears to his disciples following his resurrection, but Thomas, who missed that first appearance says, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” A week later, Jesus appears to the disciples again, and this time Thomas is there. And Jesus says, go ahead, put your finger in the nail holes and your hand in my side. And when Thomas says, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus answers, “Have you believed because you see me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:26-29)

So here we are, sisters and brothers. We’re the folks who haven’t gotten to see Jesus with our own eyes or hear him with our own ears. So how do we come to believe? It’s probably a little different for each person. Maybe some people find the rational and logical argument for Christianity so compelling that they believe in Jesus with their intellect. Believing with your mind is important, but it isn’t everything. Maybe some people believe because of a life-changing experience: a dramatic conversion which had little to do with their mind but was all about emotion. Believing with our hearts is important, but passion can burn hot and burn out if there’s nothing to keep feeding that emotion.. I suspect that for many of us, believing is a process. That is certainly how I have come, and continue to come to believe. It is a process of seeing how Jesus is revealed all around us. In the people we welcome and bless, in the people who show us hospitality and who minister to us. Perhaps even in the people who annoy us and make us see ourselves in ways that aren’t always comfortable. We hear Jesus in the words of the Bible, in the words of teachers who have studied the Bible, in the words of those who offer comfort and challenge and blessing. We may see Jesus in the glory of creation, or meet Jesus in the depths of grief or despair.

We may not have the same opportunities the first disciples did, but we live in a post-resurrection world, and we can see and hear Jesus every day. Every day we make the choice to believe in Jesus, and to believe Jesus. For those who believe, there is no place we can go where Jesus is not present -- even when we cannot see him; there is no person who is beyond Jesus’ reach -- whether or not we like him or her; no words of scripture that are not true -- even when they challenge us; no work that is beyond the power of the Holy Spirit --

even when we're not sure what to do next. Our wisdom and intellect are fine, but they can't compare to opening the eyes of our hearts, because when we do that, we will see Jesus everywhere. Can you believe that? Amen.