

“O, SAY, CAN YOU SEE?”

John 12:20-36

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As the ministry of Jesus crescendoed, he was proving to be an object of intense scrutiny inviting both devotion and scorn. Many of the religious and civic leaders of the time were suspicious of him at best and openly hostile at worst. But “everyday folks” were intrigued by Jesus.

Word was spreading about Jesus having brought a man named Lazarus back from the dead.¹ People had heard of the man born blind to whom Jesus had given sight.² They knew about his showdown with the Pharisees who had wanted Jesus to condone the stoning of a woman charged with adultery but said instead to them, “*Let the one without sin cast the first stone.*”³ Stories abounded about Jesus causing the lame to walk, lepers to be cleansed, the deaf to hear, and the poor to have good news brought to them.⁴ Jesus would have been a huge “get” on the cable news shows.

In attendance at a great festival in Jerusalem when Jesus made his triumphal entry into the city amid palm branches and hosannas, were some Greeks. They were Gentiles who hoped the reach of the ministry of Jesus extended beyond the house of Israel. They had heard the buzz about Jesus and wanted to meet him. They knew Philip was one of his disciples, so they went to him and said, “*Sir, we would see Jesus,*” a formal way of saying, “*We wish to see Jesus.*” Philip then told Andrew of the request and together the two disciples went off to tell Jesus about the Gentiles who were eager to see him.

¹ John 12:17

² John 9:1-11

³ John 8:1-11

⁴ Matthew 11:3-5

Jesus listened to Philip and Andrew and then responded: *“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”* Then he spoke enigmatically about a kernel of grain dying in the ground as a precursor to bearing fruit. He talked cryptically about those who love their lives in this world losing them and those who hate their lives in this world keeping them for eternal life.

Huh?

I smile to think of Philip and Andrew shuffling their feet while muttering, “Uh, Jesus, people are asking to see you. Was that a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’?”

Undeterred, Jesus launches into one of the several soliloquys for which the gospel of John is famous: *“My soul is troubled. What should I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, this is the very reason I have come. Father, glorify Thy name.”*

Philip and Andrew just are trying to get an answer from Jesus as to whether the Greeks can see him. But Jesus still is wrapped up in his metaphors: not grain and wheat this time, but light. *“Walk in the light,”* he says, *“because if you walk in darkness you will not know where you are going. Trust the light. Become children of the light.”*

I am pretty sure Philip and Andrew by this time were thinking, even if they didn’t say it out loud, *“Jesus, you are killing us. We need an answer. A simple response. Can they see you or not?”*

Maybe Jesus didn’t give them a straight answer because he knew people needed to see him in a way that is beyond physical sight. Maybe Jesus was taking Philip and Andrew and, with them, all of us who *“would see Jesus”* to school. Maybe Jesus was telling the disciples what people needed to “see,” that is, to understand, about him in order to become a faithful follower and for him to have the desired effect on their lives.

In composing his gospel as he did, it is clear that is what John thinks. John wants his readers and hearers to grasp that seeing Jesus in the way that really matters is much deeper and different than visual sight.

Last night I texted Tyler a message to his phone and it wasn’t until this morning he responded. He wrote, “Sorry, I’m just not seeing this.” It was a typo. He meant to type, “I’m just now seeing this.” But I smiled at his typo in light of John saying in his gospel that we are not seeing as we should when it comes to Jesus.

John is a brilliant writer. To Philip’s and Andrew’s entreaties that there are people who want to see him, John in his gospel has Jesus recapitulate the essence of his ministry. That is John’s way

of saying to his readers like us who no longer can see Jesus in the flesh that seeing Jesus involves the heart. It means coming to know in our hearts that Jesus is the Lord of life and then living accordingly. “Seeing” Jesus is experiencing the transforming power of the Christ in the way the hymn writer wrote about it: *“I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.”*⁵

You may remember the story John tells about Jesus appearing to the disciples after his resurrection except that one of the disciples, Thomas, was not present. Thomas had chosen an unfortunate time to run some errands. When Thomas got back and the other disciples told him excitedly that Jesus is alive and had come to them while he was out, Thomas said, *“Unless I (visually) see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe you.”*

Jesus visited the disciples again a week later and this time Thomas was there and he saw the marks for himself and exclaimed, *“My Lord and my God!”* But Jesus minimized Thomas’ confession a bit: *“Have you believed because you have seen me (visually)? Blessed are those who have not physically seen me and yet come to believe.”*⁶

For John, seeing Jesus has nothing to do with physical sight. It is about “getting” who Jesus is and what he is about and becoming a disciple, *“a doer of the Word and not a hearer only,”*⁷ in our own day and lives.

For John, those who truly and really see understand that Jesus is the human face of God and worthy of our worship and devotion. According to John, those who truly see Jesus believe, follow, serve, and are willing to die to the old life in which sin and self reign in order to be raised into the new life of compassion, justice, gratitude, joy, and love Jesus came preaching and teaching.

O, say, can you see?

There are plenty of people in the gospel stories who thought they wanted to see Jesus. But when they discerned that “seeing” Jesus involved making a radical change in their lives so that the gospel is served in them, it often dampened their enthusiasm. They had wanted to see Jesus as a spectacle or sensation but not as the re-arranger of their lives.

For John, seeing Jesus is believing he is the Christ of God. Believing turns into following him and following means dying to self in order to be reborn into the love and service of Christ.

⁵ John Newton in his hymn “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound,” Hymn # 649 in Glory to God.

⁶ John 20:24-29

⁷ James 1:22

O, say, can you see?

Do you want to see? When John Newton wrote the hymn we sang at the beginning of worship and confessed, *“I once was lost and now am found,”* it is not that he had lost his way in a crowded Wal-mart. He had lost his way in life. He was a slave trader, a buyer and seller of other human beings, until, in the grace of Christ, he was reborn and raised into a new life that comported with the gospel. He was “found.”

When Newton said, *“I was blind, but now I see,”* it is not that he couldn’t physically see. His eyes were fine. But he couldn’t *see* the meaning and purpose in life. He couldn’t see the life offered to him that was anchored in the love of Jesus. Until one day, by the grace of God and his own surrender to it, he could! And it transformed his life.

O, say, can you see?

Our gospel reading today asks some tough, hard questions: *Do we want to see Jesus as the gospels and the Spirit reveal him to us? And are we willing to let what we see change your life?*

Or do we want to see only our version of Jesus, the version that never offends our sensibilities? A version washed clean of his call to immerse ourselves in the socio-economic and socio-political issues of our time, the human hurt and pain, the escalating environmental calamity? A version that finds comfort in a “spiritual Jesus” that forgets his life ended on a cross because he dared to challenge the worldly conditions in which people lived? A version in which Jesus baptizes our plans and perspectives instead of us being baptized into Christ’s?

O, say, can you see?

The Greeks said to Philip, *“Sir, we would see Jesus.”* Would we? Would you? Do we want to see the Jesus who told a story about people working only the last hour of a workday getting paid the same as those who worked all day because they all were one in their need?⁸ Do we want to see the Jesus who is more concerned for those on the bottom rungs of our economy’s ladder than at the top?

O, say, can you see?

⁸ Matthew 20:1-16

Do we want to see the Jesus who insisted that providing hospitality and welcome to prodigals rather than punishment and isolation is the gospel way?⁹ Do we want to see the Jesus who declared that those who are poor in spirit, humble and pure in heart, who thirst for justice and hunger for peace, who mourn our cruelty to brother and sister human beings in a thousand different ways are the ones who are blessed because they are called the children of God to whom the kingdom of God belongs rather than to those who are self-centered, self-righteous, self-absorbed, and vainglorious?

O, say, can you see?

Do we want to see the Jesus who taught us to love our enemies instead of hating them and seeking vengeance?¹⁰ Do we want to see the Jesus who welcomes all people regardless of race, class, nationality, sexual orientation, gender expression, or worldly condition of any kind? Do we want to see the Jesus who told us he did not come to be served but to serve and that we are to go and do likewise?¹¹ Do we want to see the Jesus who leads us down from every spiritual mountaintop to help those who live in the valleys of despair and despond?¹² Do we want to see the Jesus who said that whoever would follow him must deny self and take up the cross?¹³ Do we want to see the Jesus who told his disciples when they wanted to defend him in the Garden of Gethsemane, *“Put away your weapons for those who live by the sword will die by it?”*¹⁴

To see Jesus in the way John in his gospel means for us to see is costly. To see Jesus as the Lord of our lives may well put us at odds with the ways of the world and its powers as we follow his ways. But the way of the Lord is the way that finally and paradoxically leads to life for us and for the world. That is what John wants us to see in Jesus. So convinced was John of this truth that in the opening sentences of his gospel, he wrote: *“In Jesus is life and that life is the light of everyone.”*¹⁵

O, say, can you see?

Amen.

⁹ Luke 15:11-24

¹⁰ Matthew 5:44

¹¹ Matthew 20:28

¹² Mark 9:2-9

¹³ Matthew 16:24

¹⁴ John 18:11

¹⁵ John 1:4