

SEEING CLEARLY
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Children are so honest. They just speak their minds and say what they are thinking.

A mother was on a shopping trip with her young six year old son. They were in one of those giant toy stores with toys piled from floor to ceiling. They strolled around looking and shopping and as they rounded a corner they saw a young, long-haired, bearded man in a wheelchair. He had apparently been in a terrible accident. He was missing both legs and his face was badly scarred.

"Look at that man, momma," the child yelled in a too-loud voice. "Look at that man."

The woman was very embarrassed and tried to shush her son, telling him it wasn't polite to point, but he gave a hard tug and broke loose. He ran up to the man in the wheelchair. He went right up and said, "What a cool earring, man! Where did you get such a neat earring!"

A look of relief appeared on the young man's face to be replaced quickly by a great big grin. He was so surprised by the compliment that he just glowed with happiness. For the next few moments the two of them stood there talking about his earring and other "cool" stuff.

The mother, and probably you and I were we there, saw only a horribly scarred and disabled man in a wheelchair. The child saw clearly and spoke honestly to a man with a cool earring.¹

Children are so honest, and they see things so clearly.

Jesus is like that. One day he is at the home of Simon, one of the Pharisees. A woman of the city has learned that Jesus is there and comes to find him. Some say that she is a prostitute.

We don't really know but she is a sinner, someone with many sins. She comes and washes Jesus' feet with her tears and her hair. She anoints his feet with ointment. She does all the acts of hospitality which Simon should have done but has neglected. Simon looks at her and he sees a sinner, the sort of person a prophet should not touch. Jesus sees clearly. He sees the sinner too, but - and it is God's 'but' - he sees beyond the superficial. He sees someone of whom God has forgiven much, someone who is truly grateful and is responding to the grace of God by overflowing love. "Do you see this woman?" Jesus asks Simon. He did, but he didn't. He didn't see clearly. He didn't like what Jesus saw. Neither did his friends. And, you know, I'm not sure that we do either. We often don't see clearly.

A minister told the story of a woman in her church who did thirty-five years of things about which she had a lot of guilt. So when she became a Christian and was baptized that was a big thing, a huge decision. After that she became what her minister called an "Alleluia" person, a person so filled with joy that she wanted to shout it out. People didn't want to sit next to her because she would just shout out "Amen" when it seemed like the right response.

You can imagine what happened. She began to feel pushed aside because of her joy and exuberance. Finally she left the church to go somewhere else where her joy was more in line with the type of worship people had. "I think," her former pastor said, "the folks in Luke's story are reacting to this woman the same way. 'We don't want any of that shouting 'Amen' around here or rubbing hair on Jesus.'"ⁱⁱ

Sometimes we resent new Christians, or simply newcomers, and the enthusiasm and energy they bring. We don't like their lack of restraint and respectability, their desire to change things, to do things differently. It makes us uncomfortable and maybe we wish we were like that. If we were it would be a different place, wouldn't it, a different church, a different world.

How we see the world and the people in it makes all the difference.

At the Annual Meeting of Toronto Conference, quite a few years ago Barry Rieder of the Jane Finch Community Ministry stood at the microphone on a point of personal privilege. He spoke in a manner more eloquent than I can now about our use of the phrase "the poor." His message was that when we address people who live in poverty as "the poor" we identify them and characterize them with their economic state. "We are not 'the poor'," he said, "we are people who simply happen to live in poverty. Being poor is not who we are."

I have heard similar things said about blind people. Who they are is not characterized by their eyesight. They are not 'the blind' but people who cannot see.

Maybe this is just word games, semantics, sophistry, but surely the message is clear. What do you see when you look at a person who cannot see? Do you see the disability or the person? What do you see when you see a person who lives in poverty? Do you see the poverty or the person? What you see can make all the difference. The little boy in the toy store saw clearly and it made a terrific difference to that young man, and to himself, and to his mother who never forgot the experience.

But it's hard. It's hard to see beyond appearances when we cease to be children, when we become more serious, less naïve, more sensible, less sensitive and often distracted by externals. For example, it's difficult for medical personnel sometimes to see beyond the disease or the condition of the patient and to see the patient themselves. Medical personnel themselves are critical of their own temptation to refer to patients by their illness rather than their name, the heart attack in 103.

What about law enforcement and prison personnel? How can they see beyond the crime, the violence, the injury, the victimization of others?

What do you see when you see a person who has been convicted of a crime and sent to prison? You can look at prison inmates as animals, subhumans, targets for abuse, people who get what they deserve, offenders to be punished. Warden Dennis Luther sees them differently, more clearly. He looks at them as

human beings, as people deserving respect, as people with the capacity to change. Inmates, he says, are sent to prison *as* punishment not *for* punishment.

Back when I was a student chaplain at Cowansville Penitentiary in Quebec, I foolishly commented to an inmate how unlike a prison the institution looked. He told me that what makes it a prison is that you can't get out. The deprivation of freedom is the punishment.

The responsibility of the prisons and their workers is to insure that inmates are returned to the community no more angry or hostile than when they left it. Warden Dennis Luther doesn't call them inmates at all; he calls them constituents. The quality that is primary in how he operates his prison is trust. Would you trust someone in prison? Luther does and it makes all the difference. At the Federal Correctional Institution McKean in Bradford, Pennsylvania when he was Warden for 16 years, there were no escapes, no murders, no serious assaults on inmates or staff, no sexual assaults, no suicides and they earned an accreditation rating of 99.3. In 1991 the Inmate Benefit Fund, a prison organization of inmates, raised \$2,000 at Christmas for needy children and overall distributed \$20,000 to local charities that year.

How you see people makes all the difference in how you treat them. It is interesting to note that Dennis Luther went into his prison profession "out of altruism" instead of joining the ministry, which was his second choice.ⁱⁱⁱ

How you see people makes all the difference. How you see yourself and understand yourself makes all the difference too.

Who are you? Where does your sense of self-worth, your self-esteem come from? When you look at yourself in the mirror what do you see? Do you see yourself clearly?

Often, too often, people like us with possessions, money, status, identify ourselves with them. We think of ourselves as important because of what we have.

Rev. Peter Gomes, when he was chaplain to Harvard

University, had the opportunity to speak to the graduating class of a very posh girls' day school in Manhattan. These were the brightest and the best. They came from upstanding families, families of means and status, and they were about to go on to conquer the world. Gomes was happy for them and wanted to send them on their way with positive words of advice. He chose as his lesson the passage where Jesus asks, "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"^{iv} Then Jesus invites the reader, he invites us, to "consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin, yet their heavenly father provides for them. Are you not of more worth than these?" It concludes with this sound advice, "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow." Gomes thought that was very good advice, especially for those prone to overachieving anxieties.

A father came up afterward and angrily told him that it was nonsense. When Gomes replied that he hadn't said it; Jesus had, he went on, "It's still nonsense. It was anxiety that got my daughter into this school, it was anxiety that kept her there, it was anxiety that got her into Yale, it will be anxiety that will keep her there, and it will be anxiety that will get her a good job. You are selling nonsense."

Gomes recognized the type of parent the man was from his experience at Harvard. They drive their children to get the credentials for the good life. If the parents are wealthy, it's the skills to manage and maintain their wealth. If the parents are poor, it's the skills to move up the economic ladder. What is important is not education in its finest and richest sense but useful training for the acquisition of wealth and with it the acquisition of status and position and self-esteem.

When you look at yourself as a human being what is important? Your income? Your make of car, the size of your house?

Consider this absurd example. A few years ago for fun I did a calculation. It was based on a certain wealthy man who was worth \$50.7 billion. If we assume that he has worked 14 hours a day, 365 days a year since he established his company 25 years

earlier, he has been paid at the rate of \$110 per second or \$396,550 per hour. Suppose you make \$30 an hour, is this businessman worth 13,218 times more than you? Compared to this person there isn't one person in this room whose worth anything. It's absurd. When such a hyperbolic example is used it's ridiculous. It's silly. The money has nothing to do with your internal sense of worth, with who you are as a human being. Yet when we come back down again to the part of the world we live in, how often we think that those who are paid more than others are somehow better or more valuable, even more valued. How easy it is for us to think that we are worth what we have, that our prosperity has something to do with our intrinsic worthiness and by corollary those who are poor are not as valuable. It's their own fault that they are poor. And therefore, we don't need to help them.

People in our society now are coming to realize that the good life of possessions that has been so energetically pursued, the philosophy that the one who dies with the most toys wins, is a bunch of hot air, a bunch of bunk. Matters of importance are not determined by externals but by internals. Self-esteem and self-worth are not a matter of affluence, and so many parents now are looking for spiritual security for their children and I hope are getting ready to return to faith and to the church for that security. They are beginning to see more clearly.

How we see ourselves affects how we see others and it makes all the difference.

When God looks at you, it is through the same lens that Jesus did that woman. God sees the sinner, of course. God sees you and me for what we truly are. God sees what no one else sees and knows, more even about you than you know, but that is not bad; it is good. God sees more good in you than you know, and all we need to do is to give up the things that bind us, the things that we think provide status, offer them and ourselves to God, and with them out of the way we will be reawakened to who we really are.

When we can look at ourselves as God does, we will see

ourselves clearly as those loved, forgiven, accepted, cherished by God. A look of relief will spread across our faces. A smile will break forth. Our eyes will sparkle with gladness. Joy will overflow our hearts. And surely, surely, we will look at others with clearer eyes.

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Told by David Russell, *Aha!!!*, April - June 1998, Vol. 7, # 3, pg. 47.

ⁱⁱ *Aha!!!*, April - June 1998, Vol. 7, # 3, pg.46.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom Peters, "The Mission 'X-Factor': Trust," *Liberation Management* (1992), pp. 249-255. See also Robert Worth, "A Model Prison," *The Atlantic* (November 1995) found at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1995/11/a-model-prison/308518/>

^{iv} Matthew 6: 25-34.