“The Face We See”

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May 4, 2025

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I want to talk with you just a bit about the lectionary. I print off in large print each week the texts that are assigned to a given Sunday. As a pastor I have the option of whether I will choose to preach from the lectionary, which some folks determined is a three-year cycle of texts from the Bible. There is another narrative lectionary on either a one-year or three-year cycle; it’s a funny kind of a format. Still, I love to preach from it because I will be led by it as God would maybe lead, rather than, perhaps, as I might. Today, there were, as you heard, two *long* passages. On a Communion Sunday, this does mean that I will preach short.

We look for connection, don’t we, in scripture? We look for a way of understanding some tie between what is sometimes the Hebrew Bible and the Psalm. Today, we are praising God’s name and recognizing God’s gifts to us. Both our lessons today, from the New Testament, have to do with vision, with clarity, and finally with a change in our behaviors and our actions. So, we will begin with Saul. What, exactly, was the change in Saul? Let’s listen again to that first line as I read it again for you: “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.” That is Saul, whose letters to the church in Corinth, and in Rome, to the Colossians and the Ephesians we read nearly every week. He was not only breathing out murderous threats, but was also present at the death of Steven, one of the disciples, and that he was singlehandedly responsible for imprisoning the disciples, where they were mistreated. That is Saul, also known as Paul of Tarsus. We see this change, which didn’t happen automatically on the road to Damascus. What first happened was that Jesus helped him understand just how blind he was being. So, of course, we have a figurative blindness of his not seeing the way forward in a loving way. He also is literally blinded. I wonder how many of you, if you were raised in the church, had youthful visions of what those scales over his eyes might have looked like**.** I had, but I had forgotten about it until I had a confirmation class at a retreat, when they were asked to act out Paul on the road to Damascus. They made fish with little scales in a creative way and they put the fish over his eyes, so that someone led him along. That is an image for blindness that I will always have.

It took someone else putting them on him, and so, I wonder what it was that had Saul so blind in the first place. Was he blinded by his need for power? Because certainly he was a powerful man. He was someone who could imprison others, at his will. I don’t hear anything about a trial, anything other than their being brought to prison. And he learned this lesson, so deeply, by the miraculous blinding and re-envisioning that he comes to, but also by understanding Christ’s loving presence. So, we see the change in him, and I wonder: Did he not only act differently toward others, but did he also think a little less highly of himself as a result? I wonder if that may have been the harder change. In several of his letters (which we have read and will again read in Thursday morning Bible study), Paul regularly lets us know just how stricken he is. He lets us know that he has “a thorn in his side” to let him remember what he was and what he *should* be, for example. And I wonder what it was that had him *need* power to feel good about himself. What had him *need* the sense of strength that came from imprisoning others? And what are the scales on our eyes? What keeps us from seeing clearly how it is that we are meant to love? How it is that we are meant to follow? How it is, too, that we can learn to see?

So, sometimes we have a more interactive conversation, and I wonder if anyone has an idea: What puts these scales on our eyes? What prevents us from seeing what is of value, prevents us also from seeing Jesus? *From others: “Ambitions,” “fear,” “certain kinds of fear and hate.”* Thinking of ambition, for me, I think of seeking my own comfort first makes it so that I don’t see other people’s needs as well. *“Bad habits,” “Hurt.”* When we feel wounded, we put up the things that would keep us from seeing clearly. *“Thinking of scarcity rather than living from a sense of abundance.”* So, if those are some of the things that are going on in this world that keep us from seeing (or maybe we see but don’t quite know how to act), what is it about Jesus that teaches us that we *can* trust and that we *can* scrape off what keeps us from seeing. Another image for which I kind of apologize: When cleaning off mildew in the bathroom, there are so many descriptive words for what we can scrub off . . . What is it about Jesus that would have us be able to clean that off; clean off the hurt, clean off the ambition, clean off the fear, and on we go . . .

What are those things about Jesus that help us to do that? Anyone have something to share? *“Grace.”* And it bears our remembering what this means, as often as we think of the word: unearned, undeserved love and mercy from God. We are loved with a gracious love. That is how we are loved. How is it, then, that Jesus calls us to love others? “Peter, do you love me?” “Yes, I love you Lord.” “Feed my lambs.” “Peter, do you love me?” “Yes, you know that I love you. “Feed my sheep.” “Peter . . .” You can imagine how Peter is hurt by this! “You *know* that I love you, Lord.” “Feed my sheep.” And, so, Jesus loves us with a gracious, merciful love and asks that we take care of others. How do we take care of Jesus? He tells us in the Gospel of Matthew, by feeding the hungry, by clothing the naked, by healing the sick, caring for those who are in prison. So, the scales that we put on our eyes that keep us from seeing what is in front of us, the face we see in each person is what keeps us from seeing Jesus. So, what would enable us to remove it? Is it reminding each other just exactly what we are called to? Whom might we see if, in fact, we were able to recognize Jesus. I wonder sometimes to myself, how it is that I don’t see Jesus everywhere, even though he has invited me to do so in no uncertain terms?

We do that here at this church, since its inception. We can read back reports of the old outreach committee and the mission teams of its first years: giving. We began the Simmering Pot here in order to feed the hungry. We began the Tree of Life Food Pantry so that we could feed the hungry. We have the Dolly Fisher Fund, still under our umbrella, so that we meet the needs of those who have no heat or who are hungry, or who are on the brink of eviction. We are a church that lives out the love of Jesus in so many ways. So, where might we see the face of Jesus even more clearly, and how might we respond? The question is always, “How then shall we live, and love, our neighbors as ourselves?”

Let us pray: Loving God, you have taught us how to love through the actions of our Jesus Christ, our servant leader. Strengthen us to be Christ’s hands and feet; strengthen us to be Christ’s loving voice, even as we have learned from your servant Paul, as well. Teach us how to serve; teach us how to love your sheep, for we pray in the name of *our* shepherd, Jesus. Amen