

Fourth Sunday in Lent

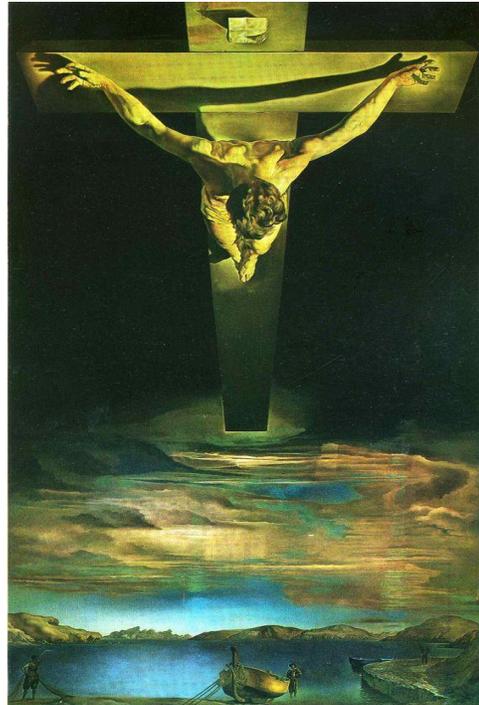
March 31, 2019

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

II Corinthians 5: 16-21

Put On Your God Glasses

Recently our youth director, Elizabeth Baril, was meeting with our Woods' confirmands and asked them to share moments of God-sightings...times when they had seen God during the week: situations, other people, events, etc. One very thoughtful young person was struggling with coming up with an example and responded, "Well, in order to see God so that I could tell you about it, I'm gonna need to have God glasses!"



Christ of St John of the Cross, 1951, by
Salvador Dali

Would that it could be that easy, just put on a pair of glasses and see the Lord. The Apostle Paul's declaration in this second letter to the church at Corinth encourages us to do something like that when he says that being in Christ means that now we no longer see people from a human perspective but, instead, we are to effectively put on these new God glasses, because we *are* new and see them through the lenses of faith.

Seeing things through the eyes of others is an evidence of faith. I learned about a new phenomenon this week. It's called "twitch," and while I don't have a truly good grasp of it much less having any intention to participate, let me tell you what I know. It is a programming platform online through which one can watch others playing video games...incessantly. And those others who are live streaming themselves playing these games may build a fan base of viewers who contribute money to their playing, and advertisers can pay them to wear a shirt or something or advertise outright. Presently, a young man named Tyler "Ninja" Blevins makes \$500,000 a month playing video games and allowing himself to be viewed by others. He used to work in a fast food restaurant to earn college tuition money. Hang on, this is going somewhere. When we ask why this would appeal to anyone, we learn that it is pretty much the same reason that wearing God glasses appeals: it creates a community, there is connection, there is support, and there is a sense of bonding.

In the 1990s, a team of neuroscientists made a discovery about brain activity and certain neurons. What we learned is that the same neurons that fire in the brain when one does something are also fired when watching another person doing the same thing. Mirror neurons/empathy neurons are evidence that faith and religion "work," and that they work best in community.

Salvador Dali's painting on our bulletin cover this morning, suggests what the world looks like through God's eyes. The divine vantage point sees Jesus on the Cross intervening for the world...Christ interposed between God and humanity as a kind of mediator or bridge between the two. God views the world through the act of Christ on the Cross...and that viewpoint/that relationship we have with God in which we are made new is the foundation of religion for Christians. The problem is that, these days, so many people do not want to be religious. They might claim spirituality but not religion as their foundation and life compass. There are many reasons for this ... I'll just name a couple.

Some feel that religion is steeped in ritual and dogma that is complicated, outdated and no longer relevant or applicable to real life.

Christology ...a comical spin on a common Biblical dialogue goes like this...Jesus said to his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

And his disciples answered and said, "Some say you are John the Baptist returned from the dead; others say Elijah, or another of the old prophets."

And Jesus answered and said, "But who do *you* say that I am?"

Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Logos, existing in the Father as His rationality and then, by an act of His will, being generated, in consideration of the various functions by which God is related to his creation, but only on the fact that Scripture speaks of a Father, and a Son, and a Holy Spirit, each member of the Trinity being co-equal with every other member, and each acting inseparably with and interpenetrating every other member, with only an economic subordination within God, but causing no division which would make the substance no longer simple."

And Jesus, answering, said, "What?!"

You can see the problem. Still others believe that religion is too set in institutions that promote exclusivity. You have to believe a certain way or you cannot be included. There is no room for openness and global awareness; no room for people not like us regardless of their need.

There was a man walking through the desert, desperate for water, when he saw an old man selling neckties. The first man said, "I'm dying of thirst. Can I have some water?" The tie salesman replied, "I don't have any water, but why don't you buy a tie? Here's one that will look nice on you." The thirsty man said, "I don't want a tie. I need water." "OK, just to show you what a good guy I am, I'll let you have two ties for the price of one." "I don't want to buy a tie," the man said. "Alright. Don't buy a tie...and to show you what a nice guy I am, I'll tell you that over that hill, about four miles away, is a restaurant. They have water." The thirsty man walked over the hill. Two hours later, he came crawling back. The tie salesman asked, "Couldn't you find the restaurant?" The first man gasped, "I found it all right. But they wouldn't let me in without a tie."

Both objections to religion are understandable; but it is interesting to note that none of these things addresses what religion is about. Religion has at its root, rebinding us to God. The Latin root for the word religion is literally "rebinding" or "binding together." As such, religion is not just belief in God or following rules and rituals that reflect our values. And...hear this...religion is not merely the institutions that represent it (like the church) that nurture these beliefs and values. I don't think church is an "it" at all. I think it is a function. These things exist in their

various forms in order to help us rebind broken relationships among God, people and our environment, the world in which we live, and with ourselves. Being a part of a church means we must wear God glasses where we are rebound, reconciled, and reconnected.

So let's take a look at the obstacles to being religious and wearing Paul's God glasses.

1). Hypocrisy. The other night, Rev. Jim Walton, spoke to a group here at Woods about the Spiritual Nurture and Development of Children. In his talk he emphasized the importance of immersing children at home in spirituality and encouraging families to become an active part of a church community, because churches are uniquely geared to help families and children. That is certainly true of us here at Woods. Rev. Walton named hypocrisy as the death of spirituality, not to mention religion. It is an easy conclusion to draw as we read about and witness daily the many horrific and destructive events and decisions made by religious people in the name of religion. The result is that some say that religion no longer really helps us or makes a difference...instead, religion is actually destructive and divisive.

There is a book by Sam Harris titled, *The End of Faith*. I've not read all of it, but the beginning of the book is indeed a gut punch. He uses the example of a suicide bomber whose action is taken in the name of religion and whose parents "feel tremendous pride at this accomplishment," and are then honored by neighbors and friends for having raised such a valiant young man. Harris points out that, in the midst of all the celebration for his action, one is left with little or no information about the person himself, like his age, personality, or education...only that he is religious. Know that Harris' book does not limit the hypocrisy of religion to extremist views however, or any particular religion for that matter, claiming that currently religion in general promotes fear and demonizing of other human beings on the basis of religious reason, and that Christianity as well as other religions, while claiming beliefs like the Golden Rule and the good Samaritan example, foster a mediocre belief system by regularly making decisions and policies that fly in the face of what Jesus taught. Such hypocrisy (one foot in and one foot out, "do as I say not as I do" religiosity) lends itself to people rejecting religion. They conclude that if that is the kind of person one ends up being as a result of one's faith, they want no part of religion.

Jonathan Swift, essayist and cleric who was Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin in the 1700's, wrote that many people "have just enough religion to make us hate one another, but not enough to make us love one another." To me, that's a great summation of hypocrisy.

2). Self-absorption...an obstacle to wearing God glasses. This was actually the conclusion of the Bible Study on Wednesday this past week. Whether they knew it or not, self-absorption is likely the most complicated and condemned blockage to our being able to follow one of the basic tenants of faith: love of neighbor and care for the stranger. In the 1950's, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, suggested the oppressive as well as liberating nature of social institutions like the church using the perspective of theology. He named two things about humanity: 1) people are finite, not omnipotent, and 2) people are especially flawed by excessive self-interest. In fact, the ancient Hebrews and Christians named this excessive self-interest "depravity" or sin and, essentially, "misdirected and disordered wills in action." We can become so focused on ourselves that it is difficult to make the move to focus on others much less on God. A preaching professor regularly encouraged his students to remember that, as they addressed their congregations on Sunday

morning, many people almost decided not to come. There were other things they needed to tend to...other things absorbing their attention. Think about that for yourselves...did you almost decide not to come this morning? And if so, what was the reason?

There are, in fact, many reasons to not be religious and not attend worship, choosing instead to be “spiritual” at home or elsewhere (and I’m not saying that one can only be spiritual in church) but, to the self-absorption issue again, I’m not sure how we go about being with God outside of the context of community whose common focus is God...which is the definition of church.

Hypocrisy and self-absorption get in the way of our wearing God glasses for sure. God’s glasses envision the world in a religious context...where we are bound to God and to others and to our world in loving relationship. I am afraid that, without that context, we run the risk of succumbing to the seduction of hypocrisy and/or the temptation of self-interest. And when we see that around us, we are going to have to echo the words of Mary Magdalene this Easter as she stands outside the empty tomb and cries, “They have taken away my Lord!”

So, these are the things that get in the way. But minus those obstacles, what do God glasses *do* for us? (Recall, God glasses are seeing no longer from a human perspective.)

First, I think they give us focus. They help us see as people who have been made new. Specifically, they help us see God’s image in others and not in our own image. Certainly those who are hypocritical cannot do this because their faith is not central to their existence or daily life. And the self-absorbed will not be able to wear them as they reject anyone not like themselves and therefore cannot welcome strangers.

Essentially, contrary to Jonathan Swift’s statement that we may have just enough religion to make us hate one another, God glasses enable us to have enough religion to love one another. And this is at the heart of the Gospel.

Religion re-binds us to this gospel and, when that is happening, we are able to move to a second benefit of wearing God glasses: making faithful and faith-filled decisions and choices that bring about a sense of peace and...

As we enter stewardship season here, I think we should all consider wearing God glasses so that we can view our pledging, giving, tithing not so much from a financial standpoint as from a religious standpoint as an opportunity to re-bind ourselves to God and others and our world. “Living and growing together in faith” is just another way of talking about rebinding. Our ministries here at Woods are all about that!

Wearing God glasses does at least one final thing. It lets us see the world through God’s eyes, and when we do that, we do indeed become new. All things become new for us. As Christians, it means that we see from God’s vantage point as God sees our world...with Jesus Christ as the mediator, intercessor, etc. Whatever. It is in the seeing of this that we become more Christlike ourselves...

Sam Harris claims a lack of evidence in the matter of whether faith is effective or not as a good reason to take an atheist approach. Let me give you this...Bear with me. I'm not veering too far off.

As we wear the glasses that allow us to see the world as God sees it, we sustain the same outlook that God does, no longer seeing from a human perspective but from God's vantage point. We are religious, being rebound and reconciled to God, becoming more Christlike as those empathy neurons start firing.

Friends, I think it is critical that our being religious is both known and seen by others as this re-binding to God. Otherwise, others will say of us, "They have taken away their Lord." Let us strive to be unhypocritical and selfless religious people of faith...not because we are following rules, not so that we can be included, not because Woods is a great looking building and effective organization that does a lot of Good in the community, but because here we wear God glasses and we may see the Lord.