

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

A Gift Seen Clearly

Mark 8.31-9.1

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Can you think of an experience where you think you understood something, but then really came to understand it? Like, you saw something at first, but then saw it again with clear eyes and it changed everything. Romantic comedies are made of this kind of thing. Boy meets girl. Boy falls head over heels for girl, but girl doesn't even see him yet as anything but a servant, a neighbor, a co-worker, or the dreaded friend. But by the end, the girl's eyes are opened, they are in love, and they end the movie on a park bench in London eating strawberries.

She has the experience of seeing partly and then seeing clearly. That's our theme for today, especially in our faith: the experience of seeing partly and then seeing fully.

For me, forget the park bench strawberries, I think of pizza. I thought I knew what pizza was all about. I'd had a lot of pizza in my life, but then I went to Naples, Italy and had pizza. They literally invented pizza. It changed my life, at least my pizza life. I saw pizza somewhat, but then I saw it clearly. Now yes for the record, for your romantics out there, pizza is love, and Naples pizza is Jenny.

I can actually think of plenty of examples of this sort of thing once I start thinking about it: I'd seen a picture of a mountain, but I remember the first time I set eyes on Colorado. The first time I saw Michelangelo's David in person; standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon. Pictures just don't replace an encounter with the real thing.

Back in high school, I got to go a picnic where there were several professional athletes in attendance. One of them was Ed Jones, who played for the Dallas Cowboys. He was like 6'9". They nicknamed him "Too Tall" -- Ed "Too Tall" Jones. I'd seen him on TV plenty of times, everyone had. He was famous. After lunch, I walked over the trash can to throw my plate and cup away. As I did, someone else did at the same time. Another plate tossed from a very large hand. My eyes followed the hand upward by a very long arm, up, up, up to a very large head sitting on top of a very tall body. It was "Too Tall" Jones standing there right in front of me, in the flesh. I'd seen him in two dimensions on our little TV. Now I saw him with my own eyes. I saw him clearly. Ooh boy, he was so big. The experience reminds me of how St. Paul describes our relationship with Christ, for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face." Face to elbow in that case.

This kind of experience is lived in the Gospel of Mark by a blind man healed by Jesus. Jesus touches his eyes and asks him can you see, and he says, "Partly. I see people, but they look like trees walking around." He could see *partly*. Then Jesus touches his eyes again, and then, he could see everything clearly. There's no explanation about why this healing happened in two steps, but it seems pretty clear that this experience of seeing partly and then seeing clearly explains what happens next in the Gospel story and how a whole lot of us come to our faith.

It's about halfway through the Gospel now, chapter 8. The disciples have been with Jesus for quite a while. They've heard him teach and seen him do many amazing things, including healing a lot of people.

It's at this point that Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" In other words, when you look at me what do you see? Peter speaks for the group, "You are the Christ." That's what Peter saw when Peter looked at Jesus. It's pretty remarkable that he would be able to say this. Christ is the Greek word for the Hebrew word Messiah. Messiah means anointed by God, the chosen one. You are the one we've been waiting for. You are God's chosen one to deliver us, to save us, to redeem us, and to set the world right.

Jesus asked the important question, who do you say I am? When Peter confessed, "You are the Christ." He said a remarkable thing. He gave the answer I hope with all my heart that you can give and will give to the question: who do you say Jesus is?

For those of you who are older children and youth, this question is now the most important question in your life. More than what is the derivative of a negative sine equation... more than how long was the 100-years war... more than how big is the Grand Canyon. Who do you say Jesus is? Peter wasn't much older than you were when he had this question in front of him, like, literally, right in front of him. We think of Peter maybe as an old man, but like the other disciples, he was probably just a teenager, maybe young 20s when he confessed You are the Christ.

This was the most important question in his life and in yours. And we're all here to pray for you and help you respond to the question. Your ministers, your teachers, your parents. We're all here, and we're all praying for you because we're all still on the same journey. It didn't end for us when we were baptized; it was just beginning for us, too, at whatever age we were baptized: 10, 12, 20, even older. There's no age limit on confessing faith in Christ and being baptized.

Peter said a remarkable thing when he said you are the Christ. We all do—every time we make the same confession of our faith.

When Peter said this, he could see, but what happens next shows us how he didn't yet see clearly. His faith had begun, but it wasn't yet full. He didn't see clearly yet all there was to see. Peter could see but only dimly. He knew that Jesus was the Messiah, but he didn't understand what that would mean for Jesus and for his followers. He knew God is love, but he didn't know that God's love is crucified love. He didn't know that the world would reject him and crucify him and try to silence or kill everyone who followed him.

All he knew so far was that Jesus was pretty great, and being a disciple was pretty great. People get healed; the crowds get bigger; Jesus talks about God in a way that makes everyone feel like they know God closer than they ever thought was possible. There were warm feelings all around. Peter loved being with Jesus.

But he couldn't yet see what he couldn't yet see. And so, Jesus tries to help him see. He began to teach Peter and the disciples that the Son of Man, that was Jesus favorite term for himself, the Son of Man must suffer and be rejected and be killed and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly.

It's important that we say this plainly as well because this is at the heart of what it meant for him to be Christ and what it means for us to be Christian. Without the cross, we might see Jesus, but we only see partly. And without the cross, we might see what it means to be a Christian, but we only see dimly.

I want to particularly speak to those who have not yet made a decision to follow Christ or those who in this Lenten season are praying about being baptized the Easter season to come. You are very special to all of us, and you are very special to God. We want to walk with you every step of the way, and we want to pray with you as you respond to God's call on your life. We want to celebrate with you at every point, and as you see with your own eyes of faith that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

What we want you to be able to see is that God is love, and God loves you--fully, completely, and passionately. Your life is a gift from God. You are a gift from God in all your uniqueness, your personality, your very being. You are a gift. You may not see yourself like that all the time, but God sees you like that. And we see you like that. The Bible word for "gift" is the same root word for "grace." You are a grace. And God loves you not for anything you have done or will do or can do. You are not capable of loving God in a way that earns God's love. It is a gift. It's a grace.

So, we don't earn God's love; we don't do anything to deserve it. It is a gift given to us to be received. Being a Christian is about an encounter with God's love in Christ. I had that encounter when I was in elementary school. Did I see everything about Christ totally clearly? Of course not, but something changed in me, and I can't even remember where or why it changed. It may have been from a church camp, or a Sunday School lesson. Maybe my pastor said something in the sermon that helped the lightbulb come on for me. Like I saw church and Jesus for a long time as something my parents did and took me to, but then, I saw it all in a way I'd not seen before, like it became personal. That's when I prayed to God, met with the pastor, and soon after, I was baptized.

I think growing up in church helps us see for those of us fortunate enough to grow up in church. We learn Bible stories; we sing songs about God—some very serious, some fun and light-hearted. We learn some things about what we're supposed to do, and what we're supposed to not do. And we learn to ask forgiveness when we've done what we're not supposed to do. And we learn how to give forgiveness when others hurt us. We learn the stories about Jesus and join with others in the acts of the church like celebrating baptisms and communion and honoring Lent and Maundy Thursday and sitting in the pitch black darkness on Good Friday, and as we do we learn to see.

But there comes a point when we've seen what we can see with our own eyes. We might have a lot of faith; we might understand a lot, and be able to give answers to Bible questions, or maybe not. We may still have more questions than answers, but there comes a point when Christianity is about more than what we do or what we see or understand. It's a gift. This is a grace. It's an encounter with the Risen Christ by the Holy Spirit. When we have that encounter, what we see dimly, we see more clearly.

To see Jesus as a remarkable person is to see him, but not yet to see everything there is to see. That's where Peter was. To see everything with clearer eyes is to see Christ crucified and resurrected and with us now. It is to see that you do not possess your own life; your life doesn't belong to you. It belongs to God, and you want it that way;

It is to see that even if you gained everything in the whole world, it would not be enough to purchase God's love. God's love is an immeasurable gift.

Sometimes it's going to mean faithful following and courage when people around you aren't always going to understand why you follow Christ, and how it makes a difference in your life.

It is to see God's glory even through the darkness and discouragement. It is to have hope even in those times when you despair, and it is to know how God loves you, even when you have a hard time loving yourself. This is the gift of grace in Christ.

Professing faith in Christ is like saying, "God, I see you, and I want to keep my eyes on you for the rest of my life. And I want others to see you in me."

When a person makes a profession of faith in Christ, they are saying "God, I see you in Jesus Christ; for the rest of my life help me see you more clearly."

"God, I believe. Help my unbelief."

"God, I want to follow Christ; help me follow Christ with everything."

"God, I know you love me. Help me love others as you love them."

"God, this is a big decision and I'm kind of nervous, but I trust you. And when I am baptized, and I lean backwards into the water, I'll remember that it's like I am putting myself in your hands. And that's where I want to be."

This is our prayer for you, for everyone, for you to come to new faith in your life and for all of us to be renewed in our faith in Christ. This is our prayer for every one of us—wherever we are on our journey with Christ.

May God open the eyes of our faith and open our hearts to receive the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ.