

A Sermon for Ash Wednesday, Year A
February 6, 2008 ~ Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21
Fr. Jim Cook

Having Sound Eyes

If we were to be honest, we would have to admit that we see things and people *as we are*. That is, we see things through the lenses of our prejudices and predispositions, and through the lenses of our fears and fascinations. In other words, we do not see the world as it really is. Rather, we see the world according to what we've been taught, and according to what we've experienced.

Well, one of the messages of scripture is that there is a clear contradiction between all of the elements that shape who we are, and all of the elements that are a part of what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God. And the simple reason for this contradiction is the fact that our humanity has been distorted by the power of sin. Therefore, our perception of reality, is viewed through the lenses of our broken-ness. We see the world the way we are. And this condition in which we find ourselves is, unfortunately, both inevitable and universal. There is no one who does not suffer from it – whether young or old, rich or poor.

Let me give you an example of how this works by describing an event that took place at another church, during their Sunday morning family service. The preacher that day began his sermon by walking down the aisle, hands clasped together in anticipation of what would certainly be a memorable message. He started his sermon by asking the congregation to remember what special thing had happened that week in the news, which had him, the media, and the nation all abuzz. But only silence came from the pews. Somewhat annoyed, the priest insisted, "Come on, people – what happened this week that was truly remarkable?" Still, there was only silence, but with a little fidgeting tossed in. "Alright, then," he said, "I'll tell you. It was the person who won the million-dollar lotto, and then sent the ticket to St. Jude's Hospital. Wow! Could you believe that!?" Continuing his walk among the people, but trying another approach, the priest said, "Now, can anybody tell me what kind of person would do this? What kind of person would give a million dollars away – without any notoriety, or any tax benefits?" There was more silence, and more fidgeting. "C'mon," the priest persisted, "you know the answer. What kind of person would do something like that?" Finally, a little hand suddenly burst to the surface of the sea of people. It waved frantically back and forth, begging for recognition. The priest, noticeably relieved that somebody, anybody, was responding, acknowledged the six-year-old, perched between his nonplused parents. "Great, Johnny, tell us. Tell the whole congregation what kind of person would give away a million dollars to a hospital?" The little boy jumped to his feet, and, without blinking an eye, exclaimed, "A stupid person!"

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught on the importance of having a "sound eye" (Mt 6:22-23). He said: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"

Obviously, Jesus is speaking metaphorically, but his point is well-made. For the human eye is the opening through which light is admitted to the body. The clarity of the light, and the accuracy of the images that we perceive, depend upon the health of the eye. If the eye is not healthy, then light cannot shine through.

In much the same way, our spiritual eyes need to be healthy in order to be filled with God's light. Our willingness to allow God's power to open our spiritual eyes – to change them from being sick to being sound – is a hallmark of the quality of our spiritual, moral, and ethical life.

Most people go through life with spiritual eyes that don't see as they should, and most of us would be reluctant to admit that fact. To use St. Paul's words, we "see through a glass dimly." But it's not so much that the glass is dimmed, but that our eyes are dimmed. And because we are so often afraid of change – even change for the better – we allow ourselves to go through life viewing others through the distorted lenses of our broken-ness and fear.

However, Lent is about faith overcoming fear. Lent is about grace perfecting us despite our weaknesses and shortcomings. Lent is about asking God to open our eyes to see the world as it really is. To see as God sees. To love as God loves. Lent, therefore, is a season full of possibility and hope.

Here at St. Luke's, we offer you several ways to adjust, if necessary, your spiritual vision. For example, on the desk in the narthex, you'll find a booklet that will provide you with Bible readings, reflections, and prayers for each day in Lent. Or, you can come to our weekly Tuesday evening Lenten program, which are based upon the television series *My Name is Earl*. Or you can come to our Wednesdays at noon mid-week refreshers (bring your own brown-bag lunch!) where you'll find time for fellowship, prayer, and a brief lesson. And so, even though it's likely that our spiritual eyes weak, as may be our physical eyes, there is nothing that says they have to stay that way. But correcting your vision does require discipline, and commitment, and patience, and no small amount of effort.

What kind of person would give away a million dollars to a hospital? I suspect, and certain six-year-olds notwithstanding, that it's probably not a stupid person. But rather a person whose eyes see with the clarity that only a Lenten world can afford us. Would that we all had such eyes. Amen.