

Showing and Seeing

John 5:19-24 and 14:6-11

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹⁹Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. ²⁰The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. ²¹Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. ²²The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, ²³so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life." (NRSV)

⁶Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." ⁸Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." ⁹Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves." (NRSV)

You and I live in an age of information. Thanks to millions of books, thousands of newspapers and magazines, and billions of pages on the Internet, we can find information on just about anything we want. Do you want to find out how to bake bread? Then go to the public library and check out a book on baking bread. Would you like to know how to install a bathroom exhaust fan? All the information you need is on the Internet.

However, you've probably figured out by now that if you really want to learn how to do something well, then information is not enough. In 1991, I installed ceramic tile for the first time in my life. The saleswoman at the tile store assured me it was quite simple, and in a minute or two she gave me the basic information I needed to lay tile in the front entrance of our house. On my way home from the tile store, I stopped at the public library and checked out a couple of books on tile. The saleswoman was right: laying tile is fairly easy once you have good information. After that introduction, I laid lots of ceramic tile in our kitchen and our bathrooms.

Seven years later, in 1998, our congregation moved into a larger building and decided to renovate it. We hired a contractor to install a new elevator and fix a few other things at the main entrance to the building. We also agreed to rip up the carpet and install a wide expanse of ceramic tile, about a thousand square feet. But instead of having the church pay the contractor to lay the tile, I volunteered to do it myself. After all, I had installed tile many times before and felt

sure I could handle the job. On about the second day, the contractor for the project walked in to do something else and stopped for a moment to watch me work. In only a few seconds he spotted a flaw in my technique. “Dan,” he said kindly, “you’re doing a good job except for one little thing. You need to use a 2x4 and a rubber mallet to even out the tops of adjacent tiles, so that you don’t get one tile higher than the tile next to it. Here, let me show you what I mean.”

I watched carefully as he snatched a scrap 2x4 lying nearby, borrowed my rubber mallet, and showed me how to level the tops of neighboring tiles after I cemented them in. In a mere ten seconds, this master builder showed me a hugely important technique that no tile store or instruction book had ever mentioned. From then on, my technique—and the finished job—were much improved. I’m certainly no master at laying ceramic tile, but thanks to seeing how a master does it, I’m much better than I used to be.

Quite a few things in life are like this. If you really want to learn how to do something well, usually you have to watch a master. Eight years ago, shortly before coming to this congregation, my previous congregation granted me a sabbatical. Sabbaticals, as I hope you know, are not vacations. During a sabbatical, pastors are expected to do something, or learn something, that will make them better pastors. A sabbatical is not supposed to be fun and games for the pastor; instead a pastor is supposed to do and learn things that will benefit the congregation.

Therefore for that sabbatical, I decided I would try to become a better preacher. By that point in time I had already been preaching for nearly twenty years. I had taken several preaching classes in seminary. I had read numerous books on preaching, including the entire *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* from beginning to end. Yet even with all this knowledge and experience, I still had a lot to learn about the craft of preaching. What was the best way for me to learn how to preach better? The answer was immediately obvious: if I was serious about becoming a better preacher, then I needed to watch and study master preachers.

It so happens that many of the best preachers in this country are African-American. Indeed, African-American churches may have a higher percentage of really great preachers than Anglo-American churches. So my sabbatical consequently became a study of the rhetoric of African-American preaching. I immersed myself in black preaching by attending worship services in as many black congregations as I could squeeze in. I was fortunate to watch, often in person and occasionally by videotape, some of the very best African-American preachers in this country, including the Rev. Professor Peter J. Gomes of The Memorial Church, Harvard University; the

Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor of Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York; the Rev. Dr. Charles E. Booth of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in Columbus, Ohio; the Rev. Dr. James Forbes of the Riverside Church in New York City; and the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. I watched what they did and how they did it. Though I myself am not a master preacher, I think I've become a better preacher thanks to sitting at the feet of these African-Americans as well as of several white master preachers.

This is true in many fields. If you want to become a good teacher, then usually you have to watch master teachers. If you want to become a good nurse or doctor, typically you need to see master nurses and doctors in action. If you wish to be an excellent cook, then go to the kitchen of a master cook and watch what they do.

In the 19th verse of the 5th chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus claims that his entire ministry and mission hinges upon his ability to watch the Father. He says, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise." In the next verse, Jesus further explains that "The Father loves the Son and shows him all that God is doing." Therefore this is a relationship of showing and seeing. God shows; Jesus sees. With great love, God the Father shows every divine action to the Son, while the Son watches carefully. This careful watching, this sensitive seeing, this astute observing, then becomes the template for Jesus' own ministry.

In our other text for today, 14:8-9, Jesus extends this pattern of showing and seeing to the relationship between himself and the disciples. Philip asks Jesus to "show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." At first glance this looks like an innocent request; but in fact by this time in the gospel of John it's a stupid request, because this gospel is full of admonitions and invitations to see, to look, to pay attention to what's going on right in front of your eyes. I can just hear the exasperation in Jesus' voice as he responds to Philip's foolish question: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" The point is this: if you see Jesus, then you already see God. There is no need for any other showing, any other demonstration. Just look at Jesus, and you'll see everything you need to know about God.

Therefore the pattern in John is this: we look at Jesus, and Jesus looks at God. God shows Jesus, and Jesus turns around and shows us. The implication is that if you want to become a

Christian in the first place, or if you want to become a better Christian, then you have to watch Jesus.

This pattern of showing and seeing is one of the distinguishing features of Johannine spirituality. In the gospel of John, salvation does not really happen through expiatory atonement or substitutionary sacrifice. That is, this gospel does not really emphasize the saving blood of Jesus or the reconciliation that we have with God through the death of Jesus. Instead, salvation happens through revelation.¹ Jesus reveals God to us; and as we come to accept that revelation, we are saved. To put it as simply as I can, we are saved by seeing Jesus. Salvation and spiritual growth happen through our eyes, and at a deeper level through our faculty of spiritual perception. This is why the symbolism of light is so important in the gospel of John. In the words of 1:9, Jesus is light which has the capacity to enlighten everyone in the world.

One way to document the importance of seeing in John is to count how many Greek words the gospel uses for believing, hearing, and seeing. First, let's take believing. For centuries, Protestants in particular have emphasized the importance of belief in Christian faith. You know: believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved. Believe in the various doctrines and confessions of the church, and you'll be a right-thinking Christian. For some Christians, believing is the core of Christianity. Belief is very important, because anyone with two eyes can quickly find words like "belief" and "believe" popping up all over in any English translation of John. Look at the Greek and you'll see the same thing—the Greek word *pisteuō* appears about 100 times.

Now let's take hearing. Again, Protestants have often emphasized the importance of hearing the gospel. It's an emphasis on our ears. That's why preaching, teaching, and evangelism are so important to us. We speak the good news, expecting that when words, by the power of the Spirit, enter people's ears and minds, they will change people. Hearing is also important in John. Greek basically has only one word for hearing, the word *akouō*, and it appears 59 times in the gospel.

But now take seeing. Most of Protestants, including most Mennonites, don't talk much about seeing and the role it might play in the Christian life. Yet seeing is very important in the gospel of John. In Greek there are at least six different verbs for seeing (*horaō*, *eidō*, *blépō*, *optánomai*, *theáomai*, and *theōréō*). These six verbs are used a whopping 223 times in the gospel of John. Again, there are 100 uses of believing, 59 uses of hearing, but 223 uses of seeing. I admit that

counting numbers is a crude way to understand how important something is. Nevertheless it offers striking evidence for the hugely important role of seeing in John.²

I see at least three implications of all this.

First, let us realize that our God is a showing God who demonstrates, illustrates, exemplifies, and reveals. And Jesus is a seeing and showing savior in whom we decisively see God.

Second, the basic thrust of the gospel of John is *not* to follow a certain set of rules, to do this and avoid doing that. Instead a basic thrust of this gospel is simply to look. See with your eyes and perceive with your mind and heart, so that you can enter into God's new life. Seeing Jesus is the way to salvation.

Third, the church's mission cannot only be about telling and hearing. Mission, if it is to reflect the kind of mission that Jesus performs in the gospel of John, has to include showing and seeing. You and I are asked to become show-ers of God's alternate reality, demonstrators of God's new way, walking illustrations of the life and love that come to us from beyond.

So let us watch the master, Jesus. And let us go forth to show what we have seen.

Notes

1. Sandra Schneiders, "Johannine Spirituality," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 386.
2. When related words such as seeking (*zetéō*) and manifesting (*phaneróō*) are added, the total jumps to 264.