
What More is There to See?

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell The Last Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A

Jesus teaches us how to see. Now I learned a lesson about how to see last week watching the Super Bowl game. We had gone over to some friend's house and I learned that the way I normally watch a football game, which is no talking, save an expletive or two during the game, but lots of talking during the commercials, no, new protocol. Talk all you want during the game, we are listening to the commercials.

Now, I'm generally not very interested in commercials. I don't need a new car. I've got all the high-priced dog food I need. I can eat both Doritos and Pringles without discriminating between them. I have nothing to learn. Then something happened. They weren't just selling cars or beer or dog food or chips, they were selling Jesus. These two commercials, one in each half, appeared in which there was a portion of Jesus' story voiced over a montage of black and white photographs.

One showed a family from Latin America making their way up to the United States and ended with a tagline, Jesus was a refugee. One showed a group of people angry, yelling, and screaming past and at each other with the tagline, "Jesus loves those we hate." This was really fascinating, so I wanted to know who's producing these commercials. I quickly got on Google because you don't have to ask questions anymore, you just look it up, and I found the website for the people putting on these commercials.

"He Gets Us" is the name of the website. They articulate as their mission to present Christianity in a way that would appeal across the entire ideological spectrum. And they did. As far as I can tell, everybody hated it. The liberals hated it because of who they thought was producing it and the conservatives hate it because they thought it was supporting liberal values. I'm not sure I read anybody who actually liked the commercials.

But then I had a decision to make. Is this just another one of those partisan political disputes you put aside and walk away from, or is there something more here to be seen? Is there something below the surface here to be seen? Now, I've had the privilege over the last week of reading Bishop Beckwith's book, *Seeing the Unseen*. In that book, he does a marvelous job of appealing to Eastern iconography. What emerged for me was the Eastern tradition of the icon, the transfiguration. Now, this icon has an image of Jesus right in the middle at the top of a rock outcropping.

His feet often are not touching the ground. His face, of course, is glowing and his clothes are dazzling white. But perhaps more interestingly, Jesus seems to be coming out of what's called a mandorla. It's a circular mandorla, mandorla being Italian word for almond. It's where distinct circles overlap. You might think of a Venn diagram, for example. But in this case it represents, in this language of iconography, the overlapping of heaven and earth, the divine, the source of all of life, love.

Jesus seems to be coming out of this space. On his right hand is Elijah and on his left hand is Moses. Their clothes too are dazzling, but not from their own light, but from the light of Jesus that is reflected. Then down this rock outcropping, as if they've really just been thrown down to the bottom of the frame, are Peter, and James, and John, each in some defensive posture with a hand over their eyes as if the radiance of Jesus is simply too bright to take.

Now, this icon has energy and to pray to it is to feel that energy, kind of like a great musician who seems buoyed by and literally carried along by the music that she is singing. That's the feeling of this icon. And to pray to the icon, of course, is not to figure it out, it's to be drawn into it. That's what icons do, as if Jesus is beckoning you into that mandorla, into that love, into that brightness. Now, I think this is the answer to whether there is more to see about these Jesus commercials. Because you see, to be drawn into this icon is to have double

vision.

That is to say, one eye is always on Jesus and the invitation that you are feeling, and the other is on you and the world. If you only have the one eye on the world, you're a lot like a lighthouse whose light is just going around. You are the center of it all. But if your other eye is on Jesus, you're never the center of it all. Looking at Jesus long enough will give you a sense that your life is a gift. And not only your life, but all other life as well. All of life is a gift, and as you're drawn into that awareness, you can't help but see things differently.

You can't help but see what's below the surface, what's inside of other people and be drawn to it, to nurture it, to be present to it. You simply live your life a different way. In this way, I think Jesus teaches us how to see. So I invite you to go back and look at these commercials and make up your own mind about whether there is something of Jesus that is there for you. Make up your own mind about whether with one eye on Jesus and the other eye on the world you do not feel the presence of God, because that's what it feels like to see more, to see differently.

Now, we have the privilege of baptizing new members today. That's what we are doing in the context of baptizing, dipping them in the water, giving them the sense, and making commitments to their nurturing in the way of Christ, of having double vision, of living with one eye on Jesus and the other eye on life, of having a sense that all is gift and to act out of that is love. That's what this icon, I think, is doing, reminding us that all is gift. And that's what we are doing in this baptism, reminding us that all is gift, a gift from God. I enjoy watching them grow up to be radiant. I look forward to it. Amen.