

Wanting to See

Mark 8:22-25

Rev. Dan Schumacher

A few weeks ago, I was leading the discussion for our weekly Brown Bag Bible Study. We were discussing that passage in Luke that comes just after the Emmaus Road story – the one where the risen Jesus tries to convince the disciples that he’s not a ghost. So he shows them his hands and his feet, and says, “Touch me and see; a ghosts don’t have flesh and bones.”

So, in Brown Bag that day we were talking about this “flesh and bone” resurrected Jesus, and I made some offhand comment about ghosts not existing. And Chuck Eklund looked up and asked, “So what do you make of the witch of Endor?”

The witch of Endor? I had no idea what he was talking about. Sounded like something from *Game of Thrones* to me. So I said, as pastorally as I could, “What the heck is the witch of Endor?”

He said, “That story of Saul... and the witch who summons the ghost of Samuel like a seance... It’s in the Bible, Dan. The book of 1 Samuel.”

For a minute there, I thought for sure Chuck had some, you know, Methodist version of the Bible or something. I was certain he wasn’t reading the same Bible I was reading, because my Bible doesn’t have any witches. So I asked the class if they knew what he was talking about – and they did! Everyone was shaking their head in agreement and looking at me like, “This guy is our pastor?”

I mean, I have been in church since the second or third Sunday that I’ve been on this planet. Over my 40+ years, I have been at Sunday School and worship more Sundays than I haven’t. I went to youth group every week. I was the Wyoming State Bible Drill Champion. I went to seminary. Heck, I went to *two* seminaries. I got my Masters in Divinity *with an emphasis in Biblical Interpretation* – and I had *never* heard of this story.

I was dumfounded. So Chuck, being the humble servant-leader that he is, said, “I’ll send you the scriptural reference.” But what I heard was, “I’ll send you the scriptural reference, dum-dum.”

He did. And do you know what? It’s in the Baptist Bible, too! There’s a story about a time at the end of Saul’s kingship when he was so desperate for someone to give him some guidance that by cover of darkness he consulted with the witch of Endor to raise Samuel’s ghost from the dead.

How in the world did I make it 40 years, obtain a degree in Biblical Interpretation, and log over a decade of experience as a church pastor and not know about this crazy story?

I'll tell you this: it sure would have been useful to have this passage from 1 Samuel in my back pocket when my mom wouldn't let us watch *Harry Potter* in the house because it was about witches and ghosts. "But mom," I would have said, "don't you know about the story in the Bible about the witch of Endor and the ghost of Samuel? If it's in the Bible..."

What a *curious* collection of stories that we have in our scriptures. And it may be even *more curious* that we call all of it scripture.

For instance, you and I now both know that there is a story in scripture about a witch who can call up the ghosts of dead prophets, but did you know that the word "curious" or "curiosity" never show up in scripture once?

The truth is that the Church has had a long, fraught history with curious people.

In 1508, when the Polish astronomer, Nicolaus Copernicus, posited that the earth revolved around the sun and not the other way around, the Church labeled him a heretic and, when he died, they buried him in an unmarked grave.

Why did his theory make him a heretic? Because in Ecclesiastes 1:5, scripture says, "The *sun* rises and the *sun* goes down" – not the earth, but the *sun*. And scripture cannot possibly be wrong.

Copernicus helped make one of the most important discoveries in history – one that changed the face of science – and rather than be *curious* about his discovery, we called him a heretic and tried to hide any memory of him in an unmarked grave. It was only about 12 years ago – 500 years after the fact – that the Church unearthed his body and reburied him, only this time properly and with a headstone.

Why has the Church historically been so afraid of learning new things?

Did you know that if you Google the phrase "curiosity in the Bible," one of the top results would be a link to a webpage that is entitled: "20 important Bible verses about curiosity (be very careful)." Well, that's like saying, "Careful. That's hot." I couldn't help myself. I had to click it.

It says, and I quote, "Curiosity can take you down a dark path and is, in fact, temptation from the devil in disguise." The writers go on to suggest that curiosity leads to sin, leads to death, leads to compromise, and leads to minding other people's business.

If you were to go to the Bible Gateway website and search for the word "curiosity" in scripture, it will bring up zero hits. But it will also suggest this verse from Acts chapter 19: "Many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all" (19:19).

Apparently, for us Christians, the very mention of the word “curiosity” makes us want to start a book burning.

And if that is true for you, then I have some bad news for you. It will be difficult news to hear. You will be disappointed in me as your pastor, but here it goes: one of my primary goals on sabbatical this summer is to renew my sense of curiosity. I can only hope that none of you will burn my library while I’m away...

Is curiosity just “temptation in disguise?” Is it the gateway to hell? Did curiosity kill the cat... and, if it did, honestly, can it really be all that bad?

What is this attitude, this outlook, this thing we call curiosity?

The psychiatrist, Alfred Marguiles once suggested that curiosity is really about *wonder*. And he says that wonder “promotes a searching attitude of simultaneously knowing and not knowing” (quoted in Peter Marty, “Curiosity is holy,” *The Christian Century*, Sept. 4, 2018).

Curiosity, then, is both the posture of knowing that you don’t know everything *and* the attitude of searching, of seeking, of desiring to know more fully, to *see* more clearly.

As I thought about that definition of curiosity, a story from scripture came to mind. It’s the story of when Jesus healed the blind man in Bethsaida. It’s a simple story, but embedded in it is a deep truth.

Some people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to heal their friend, to restore his sight. Scripture says that Jesus took the blindman by the hand and led him out of the village. There he put spit on the man’s eyes and he placed his hands on his eyes. Then he asked the man: “Can you see anything?”

The man looked up and he could see — at least kind of, but not clearly. Everything was still hazy, still fuzzy. He said, “I can see people, but they look like trees walking around.”

That’s progress, I guess. So, undeterred, Jesus placed his hands over the man’s eyes again. This time his sight was restored and he saw everything *clearly*.

It’s an interesting story for lots of reasons.

First, this miracle story has the rare distinction of being the only miracle of Jesus that took two attempts. Nowhere else does Jesus require a second try when it comes to healing someone. So what’s that all about?

Secondly, in these four short verses, five different Greek verbs are used to talk about sight — each one building in emphasis until at the very end, the man could “see everything clearly.” Five different verbs in four verses. It makes you kind of wonder, doesn’t it, if this story is really about physical sight or something more?

Blindness can be a powerful metaphor. Sure, this man was physically blind, but there's more than one way to be blind, isn't there? Love can "blind" us, right? We can be "blind" to our privilege. When I don't perform well in my job, my supervisor may say that I need to work on my "blind spots." If I ignore a situation, it may be said that I have put my "blindness" on.

In the gospels, Jesus keeps running up against the *spiritually* blind — the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the chief priests, even his own disciples to some extent. To such people, he says things like: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:3). Why can you see every little thing they do wrong, but be so blind to your own sin?

So anytime a blind person shows up in scripture, we ought to be looking for how their situation and their healing points beyond *physical* blindness and *physical* sight to something deeper — something like *spiritual* blindness and *spiritual* sight.

Amy Frykholm points out that in ancient Greek thought, sight was intimately tied to intellectual perception. She says that in that day and time, it was understood that "the greater the capacity for seeing... meant the greater the capacity for the spiritual concept of knowing" ("The five spiritual senses," *The Christian Century*, Nov. 10, 2021).

To be blind is to be "in the dark" about things. To see is to be *enlightened*. To see is to *know*, is to *perceive*. This story isn't just about being able to see. It's a story about *knowing*.

It takes Jesus two tries to heal this man. After the first try, the man can kind-of see, but not fully. He can distinguish some things, but not clearly.

It seems more than mere coincidence to me that the very next story in the gospel of Mark is Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah.

Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They say, "John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the other prophets."

Jesus says, "But who do *you* say I am?" And Peter can suddenly "see." He says, "You are the Messiah."

But he can't "see everything clearly," because the moment Jesus tells his disciples what that means — the suffering, the betrayal, the death — Peter pulls Jesus aside and says "Stop talking like that. The Messiah can't suffer and die." And, do you remember what happens? Jesus *rebukes* him, "Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things" (Mark 8:33).

Peter is like the blind man after Jesus' first attempt. He can see, but not clearly. He is situated somewhere between knowing and not knowing.

And, if we're honest, isn't that where we all are?

Not one person in this room is omniscient. Not one of us is all-knowing or all-seeing. Every single one of us is somewhere between knowing and not knowing; between seeing and seeing *clearly*.

My father-in-law used this analogy with me once. He said:

"If you put a dime and a quarter on the table next to each other, the quarter is obviously larger in size.

Now pretend the dime is everything I knew during my teenage years. So if my knowledge at the time is the size of the dime, then the edge circumference of the coin represents what I knew I did not know. That was the boundary of my knowledge. Everything beyond that represents all the things I did not know that I did not know.

Today, my life's knowledge is more the size of the quarter. I know a lot more than during my teenage years but the border circumference of the quarter has expanded, too, which means that I also have a greater awareness of the things that I am aware that I do not currently know or understand."

That's how it is in this life. The more that you know the more you realize that you don't know.

In my estimation, we are all like the blind man after Jesus touched his eyes the first time. We know and we don't know all at the same time. We can see, but not clearly.

And in my understanding, then, curiosity isn't a threat or temptation in disguise. It is simply the desire to see more clearly.

At another time and in another place, Jesus said it like this, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7).

Despite what American consumerism has taught us, this isn't a verse about praying for a Mercedes Benz or for a winning lottery ticket. It's a verse about wanting to grow in knowledge and understanding, and in relationship with God. It's a verse about wanting to see the things of God more clearly.

Do you see what I mean?

Curiosity is the only way to grow — because it is knowing that you do not know, and wanting to see more clearly because of it.

Brennan Manning says it like this: "The secret of the mystery is this: God is always greater. No matter how great we think God to be, God is greater still" (*The Ragamuffin Gospel*, 208).

It's for this reason that Edward Hays "imagines the question mark as a holy symbol. Whereas the exclamation point is empathetic and insistent, the question mark is really a bent over exclamation point that has bowed its head in humility" (Peter Marty, "Curiosity is holy," *The Christian Century*,).

This summer, I want to be bent into the shape of a question mark again. I want to fall in love again with the God who is always greater. I want to spend the summer not declaring, but asking and seeking and knocking, because I want to be the kind of person whose desire is simply to see more clearly.

Because the truth is, God can do a whole lot more good with a question mark than an exclamation point.

Amen.