



*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
August 29, 2021; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; James 1:17-27*

Seeing with the Mind of Christ

Some of you know that before I became a priest I was a spiritual director, and I should give you fair warning, this homily is almost entirely from that perspective—because as I studied the gospel reading from today, I felt so strongly invited in this direction. So let's go.

How many of you wish for clarity about some issue or other in your life right now? I'm guessing almost all of us, at one point or another, have been confounded by what to do about a difficult situation. Maybe you're a parent trying to figure out how to connect with your teenager. Maybe you're a teenager trying to figure out who you are without a whole lot of support. Maybe you're concerned about the earth, or black lives, or your teeny problem with alcohol and despite your best efforts to figure out how to help, you've been stuck. Maybe this pandemic has taught you that there is a lot of value in not driving as much, and being home more, and getting out in the woods, and you're trying to figure out how to change your lifestyle to make that more possible.

The point is that there are many times in this life when we search for clarity, to see a way forward that would feel really right, and even life-giving. But it turns out that clarity is often elusive. My parents are such

opposites that they joke that in any situation, given the exact same set of facts, they will come up with opposite conclusions about the question at hand. We've all seen in the last five years how good, smart people can look at the same data and believe vastly different things about COVID, mask-wearing, elections, racism, immigration, and on and on it goes.

In today's gospel reading and in the reading from James, we see another kind of difference in seeing, where clarity seems elusive—what makes people mistake human tradition for the commandments of God, what makes people hearers of the word but not doers. That is the difference between people who ultimately walk in the abundant life that Christ offers, and those who are stuck emphasizing things that don't matter. In every case, the difference lies in what we perceive and how we perceive it. It's easy to criticize the Pharisees for clinging to human tradition in ways that make them obvious hypocrites, but if we're honest, we in the Episcopal church have lots of beautiful traditions that we love, and I'm guessing if we dug a little bit we might find that sometimes we get it wrong too. We are a lot of really wonderful, smart, generous people, but surely even we aren't right *all* of the time. Our liturgies sometimes need revision. Our church's leaders, myself included, sometimes really blow it. And in our personal lives, perhaps we overreact to our teenagers' breaking the rules instead of coming from a place of compassion and curiosity. There might be an alternative to cutting off relationship with people we disagree with. We might discover a sense of joy and generous wonder as we contemplate where the Holy Spirit is leading St John's—even if this means some change in order to express in every possible way what love looks like in Minnesota in 2021.

So how do we get to that place of humility, joy, and wisdom? How do we see clearly? In the gospel reading we have a clue. Jesus says, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;” and he also says that “it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come ... and these are what defile a person.” This seems to imply that conversely, if our hearts are close with God, that this confusion between tradition and what actually matters can be resolved. Instead of evil intentions arising from within, from the places in us that most need healing and liberation and forgiveness, we can experience the life and generative freedom of God.

So what exactly is the heart? I know I’ve talked a fair amount about making sure we aren’t stuck in the mind only, but also coming from the heart. But the heart doesn’t mean just our emotions. The heart seems to be the organ of divine perception. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,” says Jesus. The heart perceives things through different software than the mind. It perceives instantly, through empathy, through resonating with things. And according to Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault, what wakes the heart up and purifies it—what helps us to see with the heart—is when we come into alignment with the essential characteristics of God, which are love, mercy, and compassion. And, when we are gradually freed from domination by our smaller, reactive, ego-self, what Christian tradition calls sin.¹

When the head and the heart are aligned with each other and with the love of God, it is possible to see into any situation and discern the

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* (chapter seven).

presence of God, no matter how hidden. It is possible to spontaneously move in the direction of wholeness and healing, even though we can never control other people and their perceptions and reactions. You may have heard there is a scripture about “putting on the mind of Christ,” in Philippians 2, and it says this:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:1-8).

In this scripture, the Apostle Paul is saying that it is possible for us, indeed we are invited, as Christians, to put on the mind of Christ, to see as he did. It seems that when human beings do see clearly with the eye of the heart, they become doers of the word and not just hearers who deceive themselves. So the beginning place isn't to whip ourselves into trying harder to follow the commandments of God. It's to learn to see with the heart. It's to put on the “mind of Christ”, which is heart, body and mind all liberated from the ego and aligned with the love and compassion of God.

Well that is a lifetime process of Spirit-empowered transformation. But for today, imagine any one of the situations I asked you about earlier, those situations where you are seeking clarity. You may have already come to the end of your own ability to think things through and are just endlessly repeating the same thoughts you've already had about the situation. Perhaps you've even sought the advice of others. If you still have not arrived at a place of wholeness and a sense of rightness about what to do, ask what it might look like to see with your heart. To thank our minds for their hard work, then ask them to take a seat and humbly seek God's guidance in our hearts.

Some of you already have a contemplation practice, a practice of silent prayer or meditation, when you have learned to release a little bit the endless chatter of the mind and instead bring your attention to your heart. If you don't know how to do this, or even if you have another practice, I'd like to introduce you to a simple Christian prayer practice called Centering Prayer. In Centering prayer, the purpose is to "consent to the presence and action of God." In it, you choose any word—it doesn't have to be any sort of magic word, just a short word that can help you recall your intention. Then, you set aside a period of time, perhaps five minutes or longer if you're up for it, and release thinking, and focus on your heart. When your mind starts chattering which it most certainly will, you thank it and say your word and come back to stillness. Think of saying the word as an internal gesture of release to your thinking. You don't repeat the word as a mantra, but just use it whenever you become aware you've been thinking. And again, the purpose of this prayer is to consent to the presence and action of God.

If you will do this practice on any kind of regular basis, you may begin to notice a spaciousness in your thinking that allows other wisdom to come in. If you can trust in a God whose essential qualities are love, mercy, and compassion, and you consent to this God's presence and action in your prayer, a softness can come to your perception of almost any situation, and God can show you what might have been invisible to you otherwise.

If you will indulge me, I'd like to invite us to a brief, one minute period of centering prayer now, where we will keep silence before God together. The purpose is to consent to the presence and action of God—to practice, for a short time, seeing with the heart. Please choose any word—and if you can't think of one, try using the word "love" or "release." And then, we will keep silence together. Whenever you start thinking, say your word, and come to rest again in the presence of God. May our hearts be purified, that we might see God. Let's begin.

Amen.