

“But You Will See Me” / John 14:15-21 / 25 May 2014

Well, here's another wordy tangle in the Gospel of John. “God in me, and me in you, and you in me, and the world can't see the Spirit, and the world won't see me, but you'll see me,” Jesus says. “You'll see me.” The long-dormant English teacher in me just wants to knock a few points off the gospel writer John's grade for his confusing syntax. How is it that you and I will see Jesus—in our world, in our church, in our relationships, our routines? Seeing is a funny thing. You see the things you think about. You see the things you look for. If we lose sight of what ought to be, we're cynics. If we lose sight of what is, we're naive dreamers. But there's a world that ought to be, if it is not, and if we can live for our vision of it, then we can know joy despite our living in the world that is. Holy seeing is to see what ought to be, even in what is.

If you've got a sensitive nose, you might have caught a vague whiff of wood smoke in the narthex when you came to church last week. Some of the men and kids camped out on the church lawn last weekend. There were about nine tents scattered around near the front entrance, with a metal fireplace on the brick courtyard, where we set up lawn chairs and roasted hot dogs and marshmallows. I don't know how I got into camping. It was something we did as children. In fact, we're camping out at Raccoon Creek right now—for Memorial Day weekend. I've always got a vision of camping that includes the silence of the forest, the smells of the green trees, the rippling of a gentle brook, and all the wilderness beauty and solitude of Grizzly Adams. I have visions of the great outdoors, great horned owls hooting in the night, a canopy of stars overhead. Of course, when you're camping at Raccoon Creek on Memorial Day weekend, it's not usually owls and stars that you get. Late at night, you've typically got Jethro Tull blaring from a neighbor's radio on one side and Fleetwood Mac on the other. The street lights in the campground obscure the stars. The woodland trails are crowded with kids on bicycles. The beach is standing room only. Every campsite is booked weeks in advance, but clearly, many of the people sharing the campground with you are not out there to commune with nature. They're tossing a football, or watching television inside their air-conditioned R.V.s, or imposing their classic rock on everyone else within earshot. Memorial Day camping is always far from the thing I had in mind back in March when, with a touch of spring fever, I excitedly picked out my campsite and made my reservation. And yet, the anticipation of the thing was a joy in itself. The realities of the experience, the noise and the crowds, can't and shouldn't undermine the vision of what the experience ought to be, for if they did, who would ever do anything? Besides, the occasional silences are lovely, and I did indeed hear an owl in the night.

Holidays are the same way, especially Christmas. Some folks plan for Christmas all year long. They choose their decorations, listen for clues from loved-ones so that they can purchase the perfect gifts. They look for special sales at department stores and at jewelry stores. They dream, and prepare, and anticipate. Already, just after Halloween, they can't wait to put up the tree. The family would be together again, all of them. Everything would be perfect. The holiday comes. The kids come home, but they bring their troubles and moods with them. People get terse with each other at dinner. The turducken turned out a little dry. It didn't snow. In some ways it just didn't feel like Christmas this year. But the thing itself didn't have to be perfect because the joyful idea of it was more than enough to keep that person happy for months.

Years ago, when we were living up north, the local Lutheran congregation asked me to preach and lead worship on Sunday mornings because they couldn't attract a pastor to that remote location. I was already full-time at the Presbyterian church, but the Lutherans were so desperate that they moved their worship time quite early and offered me a generous weekly incentive. Well, I was a fan of Garrison Keillor back in those days, and his radio show “A Prairie Home Companion.” Keillor lampoons life in rural Minnesota, where most of the people are Swedes and Norwegians; they're Lutheran, and so he jokes a lot about the Lutheran Church and its ways. I think something inside me almost believed that by leading worship at the Lutheran church each week, my life would look a little more like the lives he described on his radio show. I'd somehow become his character, Pastor Inkvist.

And so I did it. It was often a pain. Lutherans have communion each week, so I always had to chop my twenty-minute Presbyterian sermon in half in order to squeeze it into a ten minute time slot. This sermon editing meant that I usually ended up cutting out all the fun parts, the jokes and stories, making for a dull ten minutes of preaching. Not only that, but Lutherans insist on reading all four assigned Scripture passages each Sunday. I don't care how faithful and devout you are; your mind tends to wonder after more than two Bible readings from the lectern. Let me tell you a secret. Now, I'm a minister, and I love the Bible. But sometimes, just sometimes, when the Lutheran lector was droning on and on with some reading from the Epistles of Paul, I would ask myself, "Is this really what it feels like to be a character on 'A Prairie Home Companion'?" And I occasionally regretted my venture into Lutheranism. But I kept coming back each week because something about it captured my imagination...when I wasn't in the throes of it.

The same is usually true of all church attendance. Somewhere, at some point in your life, you had a significant experience of faith. Maybe it was at church camp, or in college, or as a child. You had a meaningful encounter with the sacred, at one point in your life, and if you keep coming back to church, it's not because faith still makes you feel the way it once did. For the most part, it doesn't. No, if you keep coming back, it's because you still hold dear an experience of faith that you had long ago. And despite the fact that church doesn't always reproduce that experience for you...sometimes it does. What I'm trying to say is this: What ought to be is not always what is, but our vision of what ought to be—if we can keep that vision alive—our vision can give us strength to endure all that is. And then occasionally, just occasionally, there is a hoot owl in the night; the old Christmas magic does come through. Occasionally, our faith in what ought to be is renewed even amidst all that is.

"In a little while," Jesus tells his disciples before the crucifixion, "In a little while, the world will no longer see me, but you will see me." He's talking of course about the resurrection, which will cause those disciples to see him in all of life, in all the living world ever after. The resurrection will give them a vision of Jesus to take out into all their relationships and all their day-to-day living. It won't give them back the bright, innocent days in Galilee before they saw the brutality of the world at the foot of the cross. But it will give them a lingering vision to inspire them, to drive them, to lead them forward in the sometimes disappointing world that is, fired by a bright and sustaining vision of all that ought to be. It is when people are no longer tethered to a notion of what ought to be that they lose themselves in what is—or in what they think is.

Of course, we all know that there is no cynic more bitter than the disappointed idealist. When it comes to life's expectations, the old adage is true: "The bigger they come, the harder they fall." I had an acquaintance in college who never quite made it to the status of a full-fledged friend. Nowadays, we're "FaceBook friends," but that's not the same thing as real life friends. Back in college, he was tortured by religion. He was drawn to it; it spoke to his soul. He was an expressive fellow, and at one point he began bringing a tambourine to our staid, traditional college chapel services. And much to the dismay of the college chaplain, he played that tambourine during the hymns. Faith, for him, was a passionate affair, moving and exciting. Trouble came when he began to come to grips with the fact that he was gay, and his particular brand of church had no room for him. Now, on FaceBook, there is no detractor of religion more bitter than he is. His attacks are never-ending. "The resurrection is the first zombie legend. Christians hate education. Christians hate the poor. Christians don't believe in dinosaurs. Christians suppress civil liberties for the sake of the rich. Christians hate gays. They hate gays. They hate gays." That's really the heart of the matter for him, and it doesn't help that he lives in Oklahoma. He longs for faith. He is still fixated on it, but he cannot feel accepted by it. I have occasionally told him, "Hey, Peter, I'm a Christian minister. I love education. I love the poor. I not only believe in dinosaurs, but I also think they're pretty cool. And my church doesn't hate gay people. We welcome them." He can't even hear it because now he can't see past his own hurt and disappointment. We see the things we think about. We see the things we dwell upon. In Peter's case, the reality of what is—that's to say the rejection of gays in so many branches of the church—that reality has ruined for him

any vision of what faith ought to be. He can't see Jesus in the church. Indeed, he can't see Jesus because of the church. I wish Peter's vision of what the church ought to be—welcome, inclusion, acceptance—had been enough to overcome his perception of all that church sometimes is—rejection, judgment. I wish his drive for what ought to be had been enough to make him stay and oppose the wrong that is. But he'd been wounded, and staying is a lot to ask; only the most courageous do it.

It's a dangerous thing to damage people's idealism because it threatens their sense of safety. We need to believe that somewhere, the ideal exists, that somewhere all is well and right. There's a reason people are so disappointed when a member of the clergy harms a child, when a police officer takes a bribe, when a good guy embezzles. There's a reason kids are so shocked when one of their teachers accidentally swears. We need to believe that somewhere, someone has it all together. It gives us hope to believe that somebody's house is in order, for we know right well that our own house is not. And when even faith and the people of faith fail us, then we despair of goodness altogether. It's important to maintain a higher vision of all that ought to be despite everything that is.

Yes, it's largely true that people end up seeing what they're looking for. They see in others and in the larger world the things that they dwell upon in the quiet of their minds, in the freedom of their spare moments. If you really want to know what a person sees when he or she looks at life, the perfect way to find out would be to snoop around in his or her bank statement to see where that person's money goes. Check out his or her calendar to see where that person's time goes. But perhaps the very best way to find out what a person sees would be to hack into his or her personal computer and check the Internet search history...not that I'm advocating or condoning such behavior. The things we dwell on are never far from the surface. I laughed recently when I read a brief news article that talked about a congregation in England that applied for a permit to hold a public passion play. The bureaucrat who handled the paperwork denied the request immediately, only to find out later that a "passion play" is religious drama. He believed that a passion play was a lewd form of adult entertainment. I suppose that speaks to the degree of secularization that has taken place in Europe. But anyone who has even a glancing familiarity with history knows what a passion play is. It's possible that the incident gives us a bit of insight into one British bureaucrat's perspective on the world.

"The larger world," Jesus says, "will not see me...but you will see me. After my death, after my resurrection, after my passing from view, still you'll see me alive and at work and moving about in your life and in the larger world. You will see me." Because you've seen what resurrection can be, you will continue to look for (and find!) its unlikely potential in every situation that you face, in every relationship, in every person. You know, it is poor, fallible people who disappoint our expectations of all that ought to be in this world. But it's also poor, fallible people who rise above their own smallness to inspire us with all that can be, with all that could be, and God-willing, with all that shall be. We are each of us haunted by dreams of the better things that ought to be in our world, and the things we see around us sometimes assail those fond visions. And yet, without those hopeful visions to aim for, life becomes pragmatic, charmless survival. We must live for the vision, keeping aware of the darker realities, but never abandoning ourselves to the despair that says darkness is all there is. Yes, each of us has people in our pasts who have helped us to places of hope, and courage, and joy. They weren't perfect people, but they kindled in us perfect visions of what ought to be. They helped us to see Jesus out there in our world—even though some of them didn't care a whit for church and never would have claimed to be doing Jesus' work.

I enjoy envisioning myself as a gardener. It's not always an accurate vision, and it's not a fun hobby in May, when I'm up to my elbows in clay mud. But it's the vision of it that keeps me coming back, though the work is hard. A healthy life is one that pursues a vision. Vision! It's all about living with vision! Can you see the possibility of each new moment? Can you see the potential where others do not, for that potential is the very life of God being lived out in your days, and years, and daily grinds? Can you see the person you don't like as he or she ought to be, and not only how he or she is. For if you can imagine him or her in that way, then you can treat that person in that way, and if you can

treat that person as if he or she ought to be—as if they have earned your kindness and respect—well, then they just might begin to try. When you see things not only as they are, but as they ought to be, you are participating in bringing the “ought-to-bes” about. This is the driving force behind all our mission programs and all our mission giving. What, then, if all the grand visions that we've lived for prove false? Better by far to have lived for what ought to be than to live merely for what is—or what we think is! Better by far to live with hope and courage and to go over some cliff with Moses, and Mary, and John, and Jesus than to stand fearfully at its brink, like cynics, and live as if fear is all there is. Holy vision, the vision of faith, cannot see the broken world without imagining it whole. We cannot see the realities of Good Friday without dreaming for, and hoping for, and yes, laboring for the equally real realities of Easter morning. A right perspective will always find the risen Christ moving about in unexpected places and creating wholeness in a broken world that cannot see him. But you have to