All Saints’ Church July 2, 2017

Proper 8 Year A

Jeremiah 28:5-9 Romans 6:12-23

Psalm 89:1-4; 15-18 Matthew 10:40-42

Beloved God, we thank you for your abundance of love, and in that love, we ask that you bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts.

A few years ago, my brother sent to his family through our email accounts a YouTube video clip.

I opened up the clip. There was a man lecturing on a stage in a large auditorium filled with people. There was a huge screen behind him.

He said, “Thank you for participating in our studies about the brain. You are about to watch two teams, designated by white shirts and black shirts. They will be passing a basketball to each other. Please count the passes that are “successful.” A successful pass is when the white team passes to the white and when the black team passes to the black. You need to concentrate. We believe the capacity for the correct answer is affected by gender.”

The feeling in the auditorium was palpable- the competitive juices were flowing. People were leaning forward; the clip runs.

As the clip ends, the man comes on the stage again. How many saw 17 passes? People raised their hand. 18? People raised their hand. 15? People raised their hand.

“Hmmm,” says the man. “Let’s watch again, but this time don’t count, just be relaxed and see what you see.”

The same clip comes on. In the middle of passing the ball, a tall person, dressed in a “full head to toe” gorilla suit walks right in the middle of the ball passing, waves his two arms and then walks off the stage.

The audience gasp. Studies show that at least 60% of us, and often even more, don’t see the gorilla the first time around, even a second time, but only when relaxed and not concentrating on the counting game.

I was spared the test. One of my colleagues showed the results to me, and I used it in my philosophy class. I called my family right away. Not one of them had seen the gorilla. My brother thought the whole thing was a hoax, so impossible it would have been for him to not see the gorilla; his twin sister blamed her eight-year-old daughter as a distraction; my mother chalked it up to her ongoing evidence of early dementia; but my other sister was really disturbed and upset.

“I’m supposed to see really well. I’m a photographer and I pride myself on my focus and my sight. How in the world did I not see the gorilla? It’s beyond me, and it has really shaken me up. I don’t trust myself.”

“Karie, it’s not that you don’t see; in fact, you concentrate really well. It’s that the brain functions in a certain way. We see what we are looking for. We see what we expect to see and filter out the rest. The real problem is that we delude ourselves in thinking that we see “objectively”- that we see the whole thing; that by “seeing” we have the full picture.

Jesus is all about New Sight, and how to see. Over and over again, the blind are made to see. And what is Jesus’ usual challenge? First, we are to see our preconceived notions of the day:

* The rich are rich because they are blessed by God.
* The lepers are lepers because they are being punished.
* The poor deserve their lowly place.
* The weak have no authority, and the most pious are those who claim the sanctity of conforming outwardly to religious laws and political laws.

These are the beliefs during the time of Jesus- they haven’t changed much in the 21st century. With that mindset, all look out to their world, finding and “seeing” examples that will support these assumptions and underscore their “knowledge” of the way things are.

How are we to really see? Jesus helps: “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.”

This is not the Welcome Wagon, as nice as that may be. This is about being hospitable to what life brings you- to invite the guest, open our arms to the sojourner, give water to the thirsty, listen to stories, care about others’ well-being- feed, love, forgive, hope, and live in mercy.

Welcome the guest who is carried in on the back of angels… Entertain angels unaware, and know the world belongs to God. Welcome not only the stranger, but the strange, including what might be estranged from your own life.

Soon as a church community, we will be baptizing Lincoln Jarest, welcoming him into the Christian life. We will all renew our own baptismal vows, seeking to serve Christ in all persons, respecting the dignity of every human being…. All with God’s help.

Our baptismal vows help us with our sight, so that we can see beyond what we assume we will see, and instead enter into the vibrancy of our own human capacity, endowed with the full palette of divine qualities of attention, intention, self-awareness, humility, peace, good will, and the remembrance of God.

A few years ago, I was assisting at a church in Haverhill, MA and there was a young couple, Dale and Kim, who could not have children and were considering adopting. They were on their way to a “normal” adoption…. When…..

A social worker came to them, talking about three little girls, a four-year-old, a two-year-old, and a nine-month old. They lived in a tent, under a bridge on the Merrimack River. The parents were giving up- they couldn’t take care of the girls. They were all healthy, no drugs, and with one stipulation. The sisters had to stay together.

After much prayer, Dale and Kim decided to become instant family with the three little girls. As you can imagine, it was quite a process, but on the day of the baptism, there wasn’t a dry eye in the house.

I went to lunch with the family- I didn’t know them very well; I was only an occasional clergy support for the church. I felt a little awkward, with other things to do (of course).

As we waited for our meal, I asked the father what the process had been like- to transfer the girls to their care.

“Oh, it was very difficult.”

“In what ways?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I hope you don’t think I’m probing- I think God is in the details.”

“One day stands out for me. Our four-year-old was acting out a lot. One morning, she peed in her juice cup and threw it into the dishwasher. I grabbed her, sat her on the kitchen stool; I was so angry, and I said- ‘Do you want to go back to where you came from? Where you used to live? To leave us? Is that what you want?’”

“Yes, I hate you.”

“I grabbed her, held her close, and said- ‘You are mine, I am yours, and there is nothing you can do to separate me from you…. Nothing; we are in this forever. And then she jumped off the chair and ran away, and I sat on the stool and sobbed.

“I didn’t know that I loved her so much. It was a gift, beyond me, yet a love so real I was shaking. I hadn’t seen it before, and I knew that we were all going to be ok.”

Jesus’ constant invitation, rooted in our baptism, in Lincoln’s baptism, is this: Lose yourself in God’s power and you will see so many things- and within that new sight, without even understanding your own strength, you will rely on your own palette of the divine qualities of your soul. And imagine then, whoever welcomes you, welcomes Jesus. This is new sight.

AMEN.