

Seeing with the eye that God see us

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, September 13, 2020)

My friends, the Holy Light of God within me, sees and honors the Holy Light of God within you.

As I was preparing for the service this week the image or metaphor that showed up quite regularly was the image of 'seeing'. I watched the Citywide Pride service last Sunday, and as I watched, the phrase "we see you," was spoken several times throughout the service. This week, I have been reading the book *The Universal Christ* by Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr, the book that the ACTS study group is reading for their study this fall. The image of seeing also occurred in some of the chapters I read.

These references to seeing reminded me of the Zulu greeting Sawabona. Several years ago, I shared a reflection about the powerful significance of this greeting and more accurately, the profoundly transformative meaning behind it.

As I re-read the reflection, I was reminded of how our heart insight can connect us more compassionately with one another and how our way of seeing can change and heal relationships. I was also inspired by Rohr's interpretation of what he calls 'divine seeing.' It seemed to me that the underlying gift of Sawabona, is divine seeing.

When I was in South African, our tour group was regularly greeted with 'Sawubona,' meaning 'I see you.' We learned to respond with 'Yebo, sawubona' meaning, 'Yes, I see you.' Another greeting that was used was 'Sikbona,' "I am here to be seen" and "I see you with my heart,"

This simple but powerful greeting acknowledges another's humanity with no judgment, no defenses, and no grudges. It says, "My heart sees you as God created you." When I say 'Sawabona' to you, 'I see you,' and you say, "Yebo, sawubona," 'Yes, I see you,' we are affirming each other's existence and at that moment we are both equal, valued, and accepted for who we are. This greeting is an expression of unconditional acceptance.

In the Zulu tradition, Sawabona obligates a person to be fully present to the other in that encounter so that each person's humanity is seen, honored, and enhanced. Richard Rohr says that being fully present to each other is always a gift we give to one another.

During the Pride service, I heard several clergy and laypeople say, "we see you." I felt that even though they were looking into a video camera, they were seeing us; seeing us through God's eyes, through the eyes of acceptance and inclusion. I had a sense that they were fully present to us who were watching.

Families, marriages, relationships, religions, churches, communities, and nations are torn apart because of our inability to see each other beyond our anger, frustrations, or grudges. We dehumanize, demonize, and destroy each other because we fail to appreciate fully and respect absolutely each other's humanity. The bible refers to this as soul-blindness, scales that cover the eyes or a log in the eye. In scripture the eye was a metaphor for heart. If our heart glasses are scratched everything looks scratched, everything is distorted, but the problem lies with us, the lenses through which we see the world. Someone once said that we perceive the world with our eyes, but we see with our hearts.

Paul knew only too well the destructive behavior that occurs when the soul is blinded, or the heart vision is distorted. The scales of judgment, hatred, and mistrust that covered his heart's eye made it possible for him to murder and torture with a vengeance. When the heart is bitter, jealous, full of hatred or resentful, then we will look out into the world and perceive its people as threatening and dangerous motivating us to bully, speak unkindly, tell lies, lash out, and disregard thus destroying human potential, goodness, and life.

Jesus was forthright when he challenged the arrogance of those who judged people's behavior and actions when their own behavior and actions were disrespectful and mean. He encouraged people to remove the sawdust or the log, to clear their heart's vision so they could heal the brokenness caused by their hurtful attitudes and actions.

After his conversion, Paul saw the world with new eyes, with what he might call, the eye of Christ. He encouraged people to seek enlightenment by clearing their vision so they could be Christ-like, so they would be kind, understanding, and generous to one another. He preached about the necessity of opening our heart's eye to see the goodness of others.

When we consider how we sometimes treat each other, it is evident that our behavior does not reflect the divine love that Jesus showed. How is it that so many people who call themselves Christian can so carelessly disregard others? Many have lost sight of the Jesus of the gospels. We have stopped imitating him and living his radical call to love without condition. When Jesus called himself, 'The Light of the World,' says Rohr, "he was not drawing attention to himself." Rohr believes that Jesus was suggesting that "we must keep looking at him, being drawn to him, until we see like him."

How did Jesus see? He saw in a way that never constricted, never limited, never disregarded. He saw in a way that expanded rather than confined, included rather than pushed away. Jesus could heal others because he saw the people God created them to be. He acknowledged their existence.

Jesus demonstrated what it means to have an authentic experience of God. An "authentic God experience," says Rohr, "expands your seeing and never constricts it." Jesus looked into the world through the eyes of God, and his seeing "never included less and less, but included more and more" love, understanding, compassion, and acceptance. Because, for Jesus, this is how God sees.

This Jesus is the one we must focus on, be drawn to, and learn from until we see like him. Rohr says that the proof that we are fully Christian, is that we see "with God's eyes just as Jesus did when he loved "the least of our brothers and sisters." We cannot think our "way into a kind of radiant, expansive seeing," says Rohr. To see authentically, to see as God's sees, requires a "daily and even hourly choice to focus on the good, the true, and the beautiful." To see authentically is to be "caught up in and filled with love and awe."

When we are caught up in and filled with God's love, we recognize the beauty and goodness in us and acknowledge this same beauty and goodness in others. We can then greet each other with the most profound integrity when we say, "I see you with my heart."

We all need to be seen, to be loved, to be understood and accepted. In being authentically seen, we awaken to our goodness and humanity.

'Sawabona,' 'I see you.' "Yebo, sawabona," 'Yes, I see you,' Sawabona is a relational and reciprocal greeting experience where we simultaneously accept and love ourselves and the world beyond ourselves. Rohr suggests that God's love is always relational. At the heart of the greeting is what Rohr calls divine seeing, it is how God sees, and God always accepts us as we are and always sees us with love. As we greet each other, we are fully accepted and fully accepting.

"I am here to be seen" and "I see you with my heart," mean that someone bears witness to our humanity in whatever form it takes, to our shame and our splendor and to our human journey. When we are seen by another's heart we are taken into his or her heart and we awaken to what it means to belong. Such a gift of love affirms our worthiness and abiding in the marvel of our own existence and knowing it is good, opens our heart's eye to the humanity of others.

In the *Sermons of Meister Eckhart*, Meister Eckhart writes, "The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love." God sees us always and only with great love, never excluding, never judgmental. God's love is always inclusive and accepting.

Seeing through the same eye that God sees us, we notice that difference is not dangerous and that there is little reason to be suspicious, resentful, unkind, and distrustful of those who are different from ourselves. When we see with the same eye that God sees, as Jesus did, then like Jesus, we can break down the barriers of judgment and make room for radical acceptance.

Spiritual philosopher Mark Nepo writes, “As far back as we can remember, people of the oldest tribes, unencumbered by civilization, have been rejoicing in being on earth together. Not only can we do this for each other, it is essential in a world that erases our humanity in so many ways.”

“I see you” and “Yes, I see you,” mean that we rejoice in our shared humanity and being on earth together. When our eyes and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love, we can confidently, as Isaiah did and say, Here I am Lord, Send Me.” We will be in the world seeing like Jesus, standing in solidarity with everyone and everything else. With divine seeing we will share a loving-kindness that honors the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity, and respect.

I close with these words from 2 Corinthians 3:18, “Our unveiled gaze receives and reflects the brightness of God until we are gradually turned into the image that we reflect.” May this be so for us all.