

Testing Our Visual Acuity

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46

A Sermon by the Rev. Christopher W. Keating

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Somewhere around age nine, my teachers noticed I was squinting a lot when looking at the chalk board. A quick trip to the eye doctor introduced me to two of the most stressful questions in life: “Which is clearer? Number one? Or Number two?” My nearsightedness was quickly diagnosed.

Kids are almost always surprised by this. How was I supposed to know that you were supposed to be able to see long distance? When asked what I was seeing, my response sounded a bit like the blind man who is partially healed by Jesus in Mark. I could see people walking, but sometimes they looked like trees.

Myopia may run in some families. It races full throttle in mine.

True story: when my father reported for the draft in 1940 at the beginning of World War II, he was rejected because of his nearsightedness. But that did not deter his desire to serve the country. Instead of being defeated, Dad memorized that famous Snellen eye chart (E, F, P, T, O, Z, etc.). As the war continued, two things happened: when he returned to enlist in 1942, suddenly Dad’s eyesight was miraculously restored, while the Army was seeing the need for additional recruits.

The other day I was surprised to hear that across the world, nearsightedness is rising, especially among children. The World Health Organization now predicts that half of the world’s population will be near-sighted by the year 2050. There are studies that suggest kids who spend more time indoors and more time in front of screens are at a high risk of developing near-sightedness. In fact, some researchers suggest that one of the best ways of preserving our long-distance vision is spending more time outside and less time staring at tiny blips of electronic dots. There’s no clear understanding of why this is true, but it does make one think of Moses being led to the mountains and shown the Promised Land. We’re told that Moses’ “sight was unimpaired, and his vigor had not yet abated.” (Deuteronomy 34:7).

Now there’s a snappy inscription for a birthday card—“May Your Vigor Be Unabated!” For Moses, however, this was a mixed blessing. Even though he was robust in every way,

he was not allowed to enter the land he longed to inhabit. Moses has led Israel all this way but can go no further. His entire life's work ends at this point.

The exact reasons why God prevents Moses from entering are unclear. At one point Deuteronomy tells us God remains angry with Israel, and a second time it suggests it is because of Moses' own sin. This third time no reason is given. He can look, but he cannot enter.

All of this seems unjust. Moses has worked his entire life to get to this place. But now he is kept from entering the land. He could look but could not enter. He can see, but only from a great distance.

There are no easy answers, except to say this: at the end of his life, Moses sees with his eyes what he has only pictured with his heart. Despite the setbacks and struggles, Moses claims the vision of God. He can see what God has promised, and now must trust that God will continue to provide.

God reminds Moses that his life does not turn on some tangible award. Indeed, faithfulness is learning to see beyond ourselves.

Franz Kafka once wrote that Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life was too short but because it was a human life. His life is consumed not by a vision of gaining existential rewards, but through a vision of what earlier generations called a life of holiness.

Let's be honest: the idea of holiness makes us feel uncomfortable. It conjures up images of not playing cards or shopping on Sundays. My childhood pastor told me how shocked he was when he moved from Southern California to attend Princeton Seminary in the late 1950s and discovered his classmates were organizing poker tournaments.

But holiness is more than a matter of just maintaining a personal sense of purity. In Leviticus, a book that seems to speak about holiness more than any other book in scripture, there are two understandings of holiness. One trajectory, writes Marvin Ellison, is focused on the personal choices we are called to make to be God's set-apart people. But that view of holiness is incomplete without understanding that holiness is

messy, involved in correcting injustice and focused on right relationships.¹ Both Leviticus 19 and the Gospel lesson remind us that holiness is a matter of loving God and loving our neighbor.

Holiness is a matter of correcting our near-sighted, distorted views of reality. When we only see what is up close, we fail to see as Jesus sees. One has said that Jesus did not see a sick woman; he saw a daughter of God. He didn't see tax collectors; he saw people who were lost and lonely. He saw people created in the image of God.

This is why loving our neighbors is so important, but also so hard. When our eyes are not working right, when we stumble around—just like I do at night when I'm needing to get out of bed and can't find my glasses. Not being able to see creates feelings of fear. When fear invades our lives, we react to situations not in love, but with anxiety. We see outsiders or those with whom we disagree as a threat.

We reject God's invitation to pursue holiness.

Today we celebrate the Protestant Reformation. But if this day is only marked as a day when one church became many, we miss the point. If this is a day for us see ourselves as somehow more beloved by God than our Roman Catholic siblings, we have become trapped in our own nearsightedness. Calvin, the reformer to whom we are most aligned, saw the breath of God's Spirit as providing a resurrection to the church – raising it once more to new life. He reminded the church that its task was to see worship as leading us into the world. We are called to love both God and our neighbor.

I've been reading a collection of little stories by Presbyterian pastor Michael Lindvall. He writes of a fictional church located in a small midwestern town. Two of its stalwart members are Angus and Minne McDowell. Angus and Minnie have been married for many years and are as stoic Presbyterians as you have ever met. Down the street from the McDowells lives a single mother and her young son. Tina works hard, but James is a handful. As the pastor of the church says, when James entered first grade, his teacher notified the school board of her desire to retire. He is a force.

For whatever reason, the McDowells feel drawn to the boy. As a baby, James is presented for baptism. His mother and grandmother are not the sort of persons you'd

¹ Marvin M. Ellison, "[Theological Perspective on Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18](#)," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 198.

expect to find in a Presbyterian church. They know next to no body in the church. During the baptism, the pastor asks “Who stands with this child?” His mother and grandmother awkwardly stand up as the congregation watches. It’s a painful scene of a young mother so alone, a child so little. But then Angus stands up, even though he is no relation to the family. And then Minnie, and then “soon before incredulous eyes, the whole church...was standing up with little Jimmy.”²

Loving God. Loving our neighbor. Our eyesight is incomplete if we are only focusing on ourselves. God invites us to correct our theological myopia – our intense preoccupation with associating only with those whom we agree, or listening only to those with whom we have close fellowship.

By connecting love for God with love for the neighbor, Jesus offers us the eyeglasses of faith that improve our visual acuity. Refracted through the prisms of God’s unlimited grace, we see long into the distance. We learn that only by loving God and loving the neighbor can we imagine what it means to pursue the holiness God expects from us.

When asked, “Which is better: number one? Or number two?” Jesus responds by saying they’re both what is needed. Amen.

² Michael Lindvall, *Leaving North Haven – A Novel* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 2002), p. 32.