

Eyes That See

³⁴ “You were born a total sinner!” they answered. “Are you trying to teach us?” And they threw him out of the synagogue. ...³⁹ Then Jesus told him, “I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.” John 9:34, 39 NLT

My best friend in ministry, Carl Lundberg, and I started seminary at the same time. We were assigned to preach at small churches in rural east Texas while we worked ever so slowly toward the completion of our formal education. Seminary was a good experience, but I dare say that for each of us, our real-life knowledge of God came through the people we served in those tiny churches.

We occasionally attended special events at each other’s pastorates, and I couldn’t help noticing the very positive attitude of one member at Carl’s church. I was impressed by how active and helpful this fellow was, even though he was completely blind as a result of the progression of diabetes. “I’m not sure I’d be able to keep my faith like him,” I confessed to Carl. “Yeah, I told him how impressive his faith is,” Carl said. “He just looked at me like he could see right through me, and told me, ‘I see more clearly now than I ever did before.’”

Those words have come back to me from time to time over the years. At first, I figured that blind man was simply tough enough to make the best of a bad situation—to look at the bright side; make lemonade out of lemons.... But more recently, I believe there may be spiritual truth in his words. I believe Jesus may indeed still be giving sight to the blind and showing those of us who think we see that we are blind. Can we really go through this life thinking we see clearly, only to encounter something that will either open our spiritual eyes, or will tightly shut them—give us sight, or blind us?

When Adel left her family, she moved in with her lesbian partner. Let that sink in for a moment.... That’s a pretty abrupt change in the direction of this story isn’t it? That’s also the way it seemed to Adel’s mom, Joan. “You’ve got this plan for your life and your family, and things are going along with a few bumps, but you are always able to count your blessings. God has smiled upon us. Then suddenly, it’s not the way it’s supposed to be....” Joan declared, “Adel has hurt our entire family, and has offended God.”

Indeed, everyone was affected—husband, children, brothers, sisters, mom and dad. It seemed a tragedy to everyone except Adel. She seemed to be happy and she was unrepentant—sometimes downright defiant. Thus, began the *great estrangement*. Joan, as the matriarch of the family, set the tone and Adel was righteously shunned.

Thanksgiving that year came and went with a noticeable absence at the table—noticeable because, try as they might, the family was no more. Oh yes, it was a family, but not *the* family. And Christmas was coming....

Shortly before Noel’s eve, and after much praying and lamenting, Joan realized that she loved Adel more than the hurt Adel had imposed on the family. But how is loving to be shown except in relationship—close relationship? Thanksgiving had taught her that love from a distance has an emptiness. Did she dare to end the great estrangement?

That Christmas the family was together again. Adel was present and so was her partner. There was a palpable tension mixed with the joy of the great celebration. Joan had led the family to choose love over their sense of hurt. But how would they love? There was a boundary—still a distance—that their love was reaching across. They acted like it wasn't there, but it was. They didn't see it, nor could they name it—the boundary of holiness—until the feast began...and Adel stood up to pray.

A famous preacher was asked whether an illustration he used had really happened. "Every day," was his reply. The story of Joan and Adel is real—and it is one that happens every day. Interestingly, it is a story that is taking place in our United Methodist Church. In St. Louis, from February 23-26, representatives from our entire denomination will gather to discuss the church and sexual identity/orientation. We love all people, but how is that love shown? Will estrangement within God's family end; will boundaries of holiness be strengthened, or lowered; who can pray at the table—who can speak for God? These aren't easy questions to answer. Whatever happens, some eyes will be opened, and some will be shut. Pray for the United Methodist Church. And, listen for Jesus....

²⁵ "I don't know whether he is a sinner," the man replied. "But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!" John 9:25 NLT

See you in church, pastor tony