Seeing Is Believing

[Matthew 21:23-32]

Emily Peck, Sunday, September 25, 2005
Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
As I read the passage for today's worship service, I couldn't help but think about all the times we say, "I don't believe it." We are a people who are reluctant to believe in many things—whether good or bad. It seems we have conditioned ourselves not to get carried away; we're much more comfortable on some bland, middle ground where we don't have to believe in things that would send us onto some other ground. For some people, believing in God takes them away from that bland, middle ground.

In listening to the reports from California about the pledge of allegiance in schools you'll hear that the group of parents are bringing the law suit because they don't believe in God and don't think their children should have to say "One nation under God" as part of their morning school ritual. The interesting thing is that whether or not you believe in God has no effect whatsoever on God existing. God exists. Even if you don't say the pledge of allegiance, even if you don't believe it, even if you love being an atheist, God exists. These parents might be able to stay on their comfortable, bland, middle ground, but the earth-shattering (or should I say, earth-creating) fact remains that God exists.

I've heard of a biological theory that some people are genetically predisposed to believe in God more than others. For me, this Gospel lesson has two clear parts. The first is the chief priests and elders trying their hardest to not be tricked in validating the claims of John the Baptist; and the second is this parable of a vineyard ending in the statement from Jesus that the tax collectors and prostitutes believe John the Baptist and the chief priests don't. Are these tax collectors and prostitutes genetically predisposed to believe in this messenger of God whereas the chief priests are not? Do these chief priests and elders have a stake in the bland, middle ground, and would believing in John the Baptist threaten that stake?

To me there is a difference between saying "I don't believe it" and saying "I can't believe it." There are so many stories coming out of Hurricane Katrina, and you know what, I can't believe it. I am emotionally unable to soak in all the tragedy, all the devastation. And then came Hurricane Rita. All the fear of a repeat of Katrina. All the evacuation—a bus that exploded carrying people away from Galveston. I can't believe that either. I can listen to the radio and see the newspapers and watch the television; but still it's so much to try to absorb.

And I didn't lose anything in these storms. It seems that the folks who live in these areas and whose homes have been flooded or carried away detail their losses to the gathered reporters and tell it all so matter-of-factly that I am taken aback. I don't believe it. Thinking about the possibility of something like wind and rain taking away
everything I own definitely carries me away from the bland middle ground that I find myself comfortably living on. Maybe that’s not the truth. Of course at the same time I realize that living comfortably on this middle ground really only happens for some passing moments. Until I walk out my door.

If I were to ask you to raise your hand if you see a person who is homeless every time you leave your apartment, I’m certain--100% certain--everyone in this congregation would raise his or her hand. I wonder what would happen if I were to ask you to raise your hand if you’ve ever been homeless. If you are homeless. If anyone in your family has ever been homeless. I suspect a couple of things. I suspect that if noone raises a hand we’d look around and say “I don’t believe it. For a church that tries hard to be open and accepting and welcoming and a home for the homeless, why are there no homeless people worshipping with us?” I also suspect that if someone would raise a hand, we’d look around and say, “I don’t believe it. This person can’t be homeless; I talk to her or him every Sunday, and I had no idea.”

Last Sunday at the Leisurely Lectionary Young Adult Bible Study we were discussing poverty. We ended up resting on the question of whether the perpetuation of poverty is a result of the wealthy folks in this country not being aware of the problem, or if it is the result of the wealthy folks in this country just thinking it’s not their problem, not their concern, not their issue to solve.

In this city, at this time, is it possible to not see the problem of poverty and homelessness? Last week at Leisurely Lectionary I didn’t think so. But you know what? This week I’ve been paying attention to how I walk down the street and how I sit on the subway, and I think there are any number of people, maybe in the thousands, who I didn’t see this week as I passed them by on my own business. How many of them are homeless? How many of them are living below the poverty level? How many of them sleep in shelters every night because they work, even have full-time jobs, and still can’t afford a security deposit and 2 months’ rent to get an apartment?

Of the many homeless people I did notice this week, how many of them did I really see as people? How many did I see and then think to myself, “This is my problem, my concern, and my issue to solve.” I challenge you to ask yourself these questions during the upcoming week. Ask yourself and then challenge yourself to listen to the answers.
Today’s Gospel lesson begins with the chief priests and elders of the people asking Jesus what authority he has to do these things. Of course the first thing to ask is “What things?” This lesson comes right after Jesus turns over the tables of the money changers in the temple and then cures a number of blind and lame people who come to him for help. I’m pretty sure those who are fond of the way the temple was running things are going to wonder just who Jesus thinks he is to come into their place and turn over the tables and cure people. Jesus, being his smart-aleck, tricky self says that he’d be glad to tell them what gives him the right to do what he’s doing if they’ll just answer a question: “Did the baptism of John come from heaven or from humans?”

I picture these men huddling up, as they look for the right way to respond. “If we say from heaven, he’ll tell us that we should believe him, and if we say from humans, all these people who like John and Jesus are going to mob us. What do we do?” So they come up with the only answer that will work. “We don’t know.”

Jesus replies with a parable. I love the parables—nice little stories with a punch packed in. The vineyard. Dad asks his sons to go to work in it. One says no and goes anyway. One says yes and doesn’t end up going at all. Jesus asks which son did what he was told. His audience, the chief priests and elders say confidently, well, the first one, since he ended up there and did what he was told. I’m sure they were thinking, “Ha! He tried but he can’t trick us! We know what we’re talking about now!”

I’m sure their self-assuredness was squelched a fair amount when Jesus follows their response with the statement that the tax collectors and prostitutes are going to the kingdom of God ahead of them. Jesus follows this statement with the statement that even after seeing John the Baptist coming in the way of righteousness, they didn’t believe him. Jesus understood that seeing is believing, and he also understood that these chief priests and elders of the people saw and still didn’t believe. The tax collectors and prostitutes, however—they got it. They believed him.

John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus came so that we may have life and have it abundantly. If seeing is believing, when you look around, when you open your eyes, when you really do see the devastation of hurricanes and the poverty on our streets, do you believe in life abundant? No really, this is the toughest of all questions, and I’m daring to ask it from the pulpit. What does it do to your belief, to your faith, to your image of God, to really see?
The reason I’m asking this is because I don’t think it’s fair not to. I think if we don’t ask this question, then we are forcing ourselves to keep our eyes closed and to not see. If we don’t ask this question so that we can simply respond like the chief priests and the elders did, “I don’t know,” or “I don’t believe it,” then we’ll get the same response from Jesus that the chief priests and elders did. Jesus does not tell the chief priests to stay on their bland middle ground and not get carried away. Instead he tells them that the tax collectors and prostitutes who did get carried away, who were touched in the midst of their brokenness—broken lives and harmful professions—are the ones who will get to see the kingdom of God first.

Seeing is believing. Open your eyes. See the poverty around this city. Listen to the stories of children dying of starvation in the continent of Africa. See the racist systems that created a New Orleans where the majority of losses came to people of color. See it all. And believe. That’s the hardest jump, right? The logical thing is to allow ourselves to really see all that and then not believe in God. Not believe in Christ. Not believe in life abundant because we’re not seeing it. The hardest jump is to go from really seeing to really believing. Really believing the good news of a Christ who saves us. Really believing in the baptism of John the Baptist to create us all anew.

Really believe in the goodness of an all-powerful, all-knowing God. Now I’ve set you up, haven’t I? I’ve told you what the hardest jump is, and you’re ready to hear how to make that jump. Here goes: You don’t. You don’t make that jump—you can’t. God does it. Listen to what Jesus says: “John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

In the end, seeing is a different kind of believing. If you’re looking for proof of abundant life and the end of poverty and suffering; if you’re looking for proof of the salvation that Christ offers and entry into heaven right now, a heaven far from the streets of New York City—sorry, that’s not what Christ is offering. What Christ is offering us is the chance to change our minds and use the power of an experience of Christ to work for the betterment of this world.

Look around you. Look at all the people you pass. Look at homeless people as dignified people just like you view your best friends and believe. Believe that poverty is your problem, your concern, and your issue to solve. Why? Because seeing is believing. Seeing these people as Christ sees them is to believe they are just as important as you are.
Seeing the devastation from hurricanes in this country and the devastation in other countries from injustice and corrupt governments is to see your responsibility to make this world a fair, just, and equal place. Your place is next to Christ in this work. Tax collectors and prostitutes and homeless people and immigrants and day laborers and all of our society’s oppressed and hated people are Christ’s first choice for the kingdom of God. Make it so. See them all as this valuable.

Change your mind. Be like that first son who starts out not listening and then goes to the vineyard to work. There’s a lot of work to be done and you are partners with Christ in the work of salvation of a broken world. Change your mind. See and believe in a completely new world, a world that models the kingdom of God. Empower others. Help the poor to have life abundantly.

How do you make that big jump from seeing how the world really is to believing in the hope and salvation of Jesus Christ? Let Jesus be the one who does it. You’re not out here to jump on your own. You are here to experience God, experience Christ, and take that into the world for an abundant life for all. So go. Take that jump. See and believe it to be so. Believe it to be your work, in partnership with Christ. The work of the kingdom of God. Let God change your mind and go into the vineyard after all.