

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 2, 2008

### What Do You See?

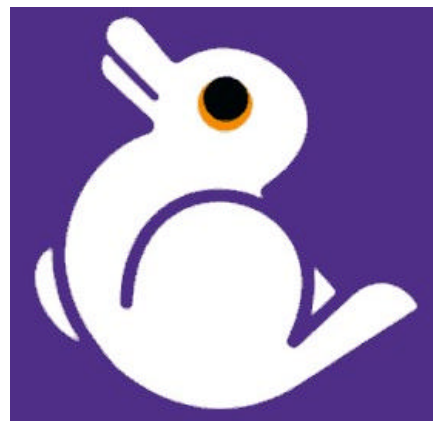
John 9:1-41

Perception is a tricky thing.

Take a look at this picture. What do you see? A chalice? Keep looking. What else do you see? Do you see the faces looking at each other?



How about this one? What do you see? Surely you've seen this little eye trick before. What animal do you see? A duck? A rabbit?



Now look at this picture. What do you see? Can you make anything out? This one is from the famous and controversial Rorschach Inkblot Test.

Psychologists are supposed to be able to learn a lot about you by what you see in these inkblots. The basis of the test is that since



they're just inkblots, *what you see says more about you* than about the spot on the paper.

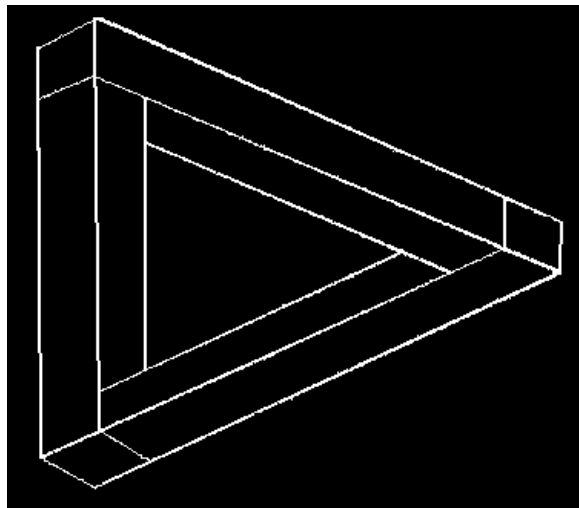
Here's a picture that might tell you something about yourself. What do you see? A woman? Is she a young woman wearing a hat, or an old woman wearing a shawl? Depending on the woman you see, what is your feeling about her? Offense or anger or pity or compassion?



The young woman in the fancy hat is looking away, like she won't give you the time of day. The older woman is facing you, looking sad.

If you can see one but not the other, don't worry. It's common to have difficulty changing your perception when you've become accustomed to seeing things a certain way.

The last picture you'll just have to look at for a while. It's one of those Escher pictures that just messes with you. It's like the doctrine of the Trinity – you'll never make logical sense of it, but it's fascinating to behold and ponder.



Isn't it intriguing how perception works!  
What makes us able to see certain things, and unable to see others?  
Especially when the person sitting next to you  
seems able to see things you can't  
and unable to see things you find perfectly clear!

The story of Jesus and the Man born blind is a story about seeing ...  
...and not being able to see.

As Jesus walks along with his disciples,  
they look and see a man who is obviously a sinner,  
or whose parents must have been sinners.  
How do the disciples think they know this?

What they actually see is a man who was born blind.  
It's hard not to hear some arrogance in their voices,  
even if mingled with pity and curiosity,  
when they ask the question:  
*"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*

When Jesus speaks, he corrects their vision:  
*Neither this man nor his parents sinned;  
he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.*

It seems to be a natural thing for us, like the disciples,  
to draw conclusions about people based on what we see,  
or, rather, what we think we see.

This is surely true of people we do not know,  
when we meet them for the first time,  
or just see them in passing without an introduction.  
Our minds very quickly create impressions, associations, and even stories  
to make sense of what we see.

Just this week, I was having a conversation with someone,  
and the comment was made,  
*"Oh, I know her! She's the one who always looks so angry."*  
I was a bit taken aback by the comment,  
because the woman referred to,  
while she has perhaps more reason than most of us to be angry,  
is a very friendly, sensitive, compassionate person.  
The commenter was simply doing what the disciples did,  
what we all do in our minds,

trying to make sense of what we see,  
or what we think we see.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesus, in the gospel of John, corrects our vision.  
He removes our distortions like scales from the eyes.  
He is the true light who enlightens everyone.  
Apart from him we are blind. Abiding in him learn truly to see.

While it is the man born blind  
to whose eyes Jesus applies the mud,  
and tells him, Go and Wash,  
the broader focus and question of the story  
is whether the disciples, and the man's neighbors  
– and perhaps even the Pharisees –  
will be healed of their distorted vision and be able truly to see.

The neighbors of this man cannot believe their eyes:  
*Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?*  
*Some were saying, "It is he... can't you see it, look again, see?"*  
*Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him."*  
*He kept saying, "I am the man."*  
It can be frightening to see what you haven't seen before.  
We try to make sense of our lives, make sense of our selves,  
make sense of the world around us.  
We think we have it sorted out and everything in place,  
and then, like a blind person  
who walks through a familiar room  
and suddenly finds the furniture out of place,  
we slam into something unexpected, and realize  
the picture in our minds is not the reality before us.

People are generally more complex than we imagine.  
And we tend to reduce and simplify things.

When you see a person, what do you see?  
Do you categorize him?  
Do you make judgments about her?  
Do you admire or criticize? And on what basis?

When you begin to get to know a person,  
there is more basis for making judgments,  
for admiration or criticism,

but still, do you really see all you think you see?

Do we tend to see a soul half-empty, or a soul half-full?  
Do we tend to notice the sins, the quirks, the shortcomings in a person?  
Or do we see the good? the genuine? the compassion?

When we look at a person, do we simply see their "presentation,"  
their current reality, with all its warts and wrinkles and weakness?  
Or can our imagination perhaps work in a more compassionate direction  
and help us to see who that person might become  
if he lived into his full self?  
if she were raised up to her true stature?

Or do we, like the Pharisees, find some self-assurance,  
some sense of value, by pointing out the brokenness of others,  
by devaluing them,  
by reducing them to just what we can observe.

When we do this, we forget that God can see all things,  
and we can see only in part.

We can only know in part now, but God knows this person fully.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Pharisees were unwilling to give up their way of seeing.  
They had too much invested in their delusion  
to accept the true light when Jesus revealed the truth  
about the man born blind.

But the disciples, it seems, learn to accept and live with  
the ambiguity of the encounter.

And the man born blind, comes away with a new vision of himself,  
and of the world around him,  
as do the disciples.

C. S. Lewis, in the *Weight of Glory*, reminds us  
that when we encounter a person in this life, in this world,  
we are seeing someone who, in Christ, is destined for glory.  
And we should regard, and relate to that one, to anyone,  
as one who holds within them some true essence, some true self,  
that God will redeem and make perfect.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is this kind of vision, this kind of transformation,  
that Christ offers when we come to the table.

Here, Christ offers to remove the scales of our eyes,  
so that we begin to see, truly to see  
*who we are* and who we are destined to become,  
*who others are*, and who they are destined to become,  
and ultimately, *who God is, has always been, and will always be.*

Here we learn that where we see suffering,  
our response should not be judgment, but compassion.  
And where we see sin, our response should not be offense,  
but solidarity with one who is blind and broken like us.  
And where we see a life distorted into ugliness  
our response should not be repulsion, but hope,  
hope for one who will be redeemed and restored to beauty  
in God's eternal realm.

So then next time you see that face that you are tempted to judge,  
or dislike,  
or even to hate, and condemn,  
whether you meet that person at work,  
or here at church, or on TV, or even in your own home,  
or perhaps each morning in the mirror...

...when you see the face of the one you wish to condemn,  
pray to the Lord to open your eyes,  
to do that eye trick  
that enables you to see what he sees:  
a person God loves and will redeem  
a person you will see become beautiful and perfect,  
in the glory of God's eternal kingdom.