

Seen and Unseen  
2 Cor 4: 13-5:1  
February 24, 2019  
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

We put a lot of stock in what we see. “You have to see it to believe it”, we say. “Seeing is believing”, we insist. We take and send photos on our smart phones, post them on Instagram and Facebook, and upload videos to YouTube so that everyone can *see!* We make over our bodies, we color our hair, we spend incredible amounts of money on clothes, on our homes, our yards, our cars so that others can *see* how good we look, how well we’re doing, how much we have. “What you see is what you get”, we say. All so pretty; all so attractive; all so much on the surface without revealing what matters most.

Seeing is an incredible gift; just lose your glasses or contacts once or play a blind-fold game and you have a new appreciation for how important our sight is. We want to see what we’re doing, where we’re headed, and what everyone else is up to as well. We consider sight our “window on the world.” Just by looking we think we can “see it all.” We use sight as a primary tool to evaluate and investigate the people, locations and events around us. We make judgements and determine value on what our eyes tell us.

But the Apostle Paul invites us to wonder if our sight is really the best way of knowing the ways of God. In this letter to the church at Corinth, Paul is struggling to defend himself and his ministry in a controversy with the church over money. There seemed to be a difference between how the church “saw” what he was doing and how Paul saw himself. In the opening chapters Paul makes several references to things that the church can and can’t see; to things “veiled” and “hidden”, waiting to be revealed. He acknowledges the struggles they have all experienced in the past and encourages them now to focus not on what is seen, but on what is

yet to be revealed. He encourages them not to “loose heart”; that what they have experienced in the past is just a prelude to an extraordinary future. That what we see isn’t all there is; he seems to be suggesting, “there’s more to this than meets the eye.”

This got me thinking about us: About how we currently “see” ourselves and our life and ministry in this place. Today marks my sixth month with you as your Acting Pastor. We have come quite a long way from where we were in early September. What I saw when I returned was a group of hurting people who had weathered a great storm, and who were still reeling in its aftermath. I saw half the number of people who filled these pews when I left you three years ago. I saw the capped tower, the empty classrooms, the look of uncertainty in your eyes. Looking around today, someone who doesn’t know us might see something similar: a small group gathered for worship, a tower still temporarily capped, still more rooms than people but to them I would say, “look closely; there is *much* more to us than meets the eye!”

Is seeing really believing? Is it enough? Does it give us the full picture? If a stranger walked in today, what would they see in us? What pictures would they take to post on Facebook? What images might they send to their friends? What scenes would capture their imaginations? What visual would tell the story, our story, of the struggle and the hope that lives in this place?

Well, look around! What do *you* see? You might see a small congregation, but do you also see the great spirit and the strong faith that is kindled among you? You might see a large building and a few folks, but are you also seeing the number of children who use this building five days a week: children learning to be actors, children getting homework help, nutritious afterschool snacks and personal attention, children working and playing in ways that encourage their educational and social skills. And four days a week, women and men who are overcoming

addiction are finding healing and wholeness right here in this place! Are you *seeing* what God is doing in this place?

If someone came to visit us this morning, they might see our building isn't easily accessible, but would they see how open and welcoming we are of people some other churches exclude? Would they see the warmth in our relationships with each other? Would they capture a glimpse of how creating and enjoying music fills and stirs our souls?

If we gave them a tour, they might see the cadre of women who consistently nurture our children and youth with thoughtful, creative activities. They might see the enthusiasm and joy that radiates from our musicians. They might see the bags of food piled up to go to Cluster, but would they catch a glimpse of our compassion and our concern for justice that is represented there as well? They could wander into the adult Sunday School class and see a small, dedicated group intentionally deepening their faith in community with one another. They could watch as Nancy cleans, and Mike and Rick and Ruth respond to the myriad building needs. They wouldn't think it was anything new but everything from the organization of the Library to the name tags on our shirts to the location of our colorful banners has "Jeanne" written all over it! Someone new won't see litter in the parking lot, around the property or leftover bulletins in the pews, *because* of our committed "church mice." They won't notice that there are ushers and bulletins and music every week, heat and lights, because they will assume them; but we don't.

What we see is not usually the entire story, whether we are talking about the new neighbor who moved in down the street or the homeless person sitting on the bench or the young mom who rings the bell to ask for food or the old man who comes in search of money. There is so

much more to all of us than meets the eye! So much more of God, so much more of hope, so much more of possibility than even we can begin to realize.

What we see is very important, but it is not the only thing! It is important that visitors see that we are welcoming, that children know that they have a valued place here; it's important that it all looks good! But Paul reminds us that seeing is not everything! That the focus of our ministry actually needs to be someplace else.

And this is where he points us to all that is unseen: to find our hope, our strength, our courage, our faith in what is not yet revealed. How difficult that is when we cannot take its' picture, we cannot hold it up as a reminder; but we simply need to trust each other and God and to remember--all is *not yet revealed*.

Paul invites us to have patience. "So we do not loose heart," he says. Because he knows that that we are eager for something else, for new life, for new members, for a new expression of our call and faith! Yet he invites us to stop to remember that the present challenges --the "slight momentary afflictions" he calls them (this from a man who has been shipwrecked, ill, despondent, and alone) will one day mean nothing, expect that they prepare us for greater things ahead; for the day we look back and say, "*That? That was nothing!*"

We *are* looking ahead....to the day when all this is nothing more than the ground on which we have built God's future. We *are* looking ahead, to a day when anyone who wants can enter this building because it's barrier free and accessible. We *are* looking ahead to partnerships with our neighbors that bridge the divide between races and cultures and ethnicities and gender expressions. We are beginning to see what **God** sees, not in the abstract, but here, in this place.

We do not lose heart, because, Paul reminds us, even as our “outer nature”—the past—is wasting away, “our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” Our “inner nature”—our *faith* in God’s steadfast love and endless mercy, our *confidence* in God’s leading and guidance, our *trust* in the process to discern God’s future—is being renewed when we place our hope in what is not seen but is of God.

Hard to believe in the age of “seeing is believing” that we are called to focus on what we cannot see, and to wait and trust for it to revealed itself. Earlier in the same chapter, Paul said, “we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” He’s reminding us that our fragility is intentional, that our struggle is to trust God, to follow the openings, to plant the seeds, to believe in the growth, is God’s way of making sure we aren’t tempted to take the credit for the good stuff when it comes! “Clay jars” are fragile, temporary; God is eternal. And it is our hope in God that allows us to trust in what we cannot see, to open ourselves to the possibilities, to believe that the seeds that are planted will indeed flourish even as we continue to grow in God’s love.

It seems to be in our nature to believe in only what we see. But it is in *God’s nature* to imagine the unimaginable, to reveal what is hidden, to break open the possibilities to lead to new life! May we seek the courage to focus our heart’s attention on what is yet unseen, that we might know the “eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” which is the work and way of God before us.