

“In the Shelter of Each Other: Seeing the Unseen Soul”
Acts 8:26-38

One of the hardest things to embrace in life is that what we see is more about us than about the reality around us. All of our seeing is subjective and colored by our own experiences. And yet it is the only reality we have access to unless we open ourselves to divine wisdom and to the wisdom of others. A big part of the challenge is that our brains, as wonderful as they may be, are limited in what they can perceive. Take the concept of Change Blindness which is a visual phenomenon that occurs when a person doesn't notice a significant change in a visual scene. It is shown in this video:

<https://youtu.be/pqgwZEdoH5w>

Such realizations can lead us to despair and to thinking that we can never trust our perceptions or the perceptions of others. Yet, there is a flip side to realizing that all of our seeing is subjective. It frees us from the constant obsession with our own opinions to be able to pursue a larger experience of life that includes our higher senses and connections.

In our Western culture, we tend to focus so much on our mental abilities to see life and others through the analytical tools of the mind. But in faith we know that there is so much more to who God created us to be than just our rational minds. We are endowed with souls and bodies that know deeper wisdom. We are also blessed with others around us who accompany us on the journey and with the Spirit of God that is always nudging us to greater wisdom and vision.

In our Bible story for today we hear about the power of such seeing to transform hate, fear, judgment, into love and kinship. We see both characters being able to sense the power of their connection beyond the normal blindness of their day. They both dared to break some major barriers for the sake of love. Philip, who was one of the new seven deacons elected by the church to serve the daily food, was Greek in his ethnicity. He was first to the city of Samaria and preached the gospel there to those who were considered outsiders to the Jewish faith. He also performed great deeds of healing and faith. Immediately after that he received a call from the Holy Spirit to go to the desert. All of this was taking place before the meeting of the church leadership in Jerusalem which sanctioned mission to the outsiders. So from a rational point of view, he should have stayed with his own group, but because Philip had soul vision, he saw the souls of others and was able to connect beyond the barriers and fears of his day. You can say that Philip was ahead of his time. He was on the cutting edge of mission despite the fact that he knew that it was risky business to do that. And all of that was because of a message from an angel! A person who only focuses on the mind could have easily dismissed that, but because Philip was trained in soul seeing, he had greater wisdom than those around him.

Philip's call to adventure was dangerous. Yet, because of faith, he was not reluctant. To appreciate how radical Philip's action was, we need to remember that the man he reached out to, was an outcast. He was a foreigner from Ethiopia and had a dubious sexual identity (way before sexual identity was something most people were aware of!). He was coming back from Jerusalem. Most likely the eunuch was not allowed in the temple to worship because of his sexual identity. He had travelled from Ethiopia to Jerusalem but was stuck outside. Then on the way back he was reading the scripture from Isaiah 53 about the suffering servant. He could identify so much with the suffering servant because that was his life. He was used by people to fulfill their needs. He was robbed of an important part of his humanity in order to be used in the palace of the queen. Yet, he struggled with understanding the scripture because it seemed that most of the world would have believed that God would come in forceful strength.

Into this scene of seeking and confusion, God called Philip to heal the heart of a broken man. Philip told the eunuch about Jesus, a man who was abused and violated by the systems of power in the world and yet remained faithful to the power of love. That changed everything for Philip! Philip was going against a very strong prejudice in his culture and religion. The people of his time struggled with accepting eunuchs into the assembly of faith. This was based on the teachings of Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy 23:1. Even though later on the prophets lifted that ban as we see in Isaiah 56:4-5, there was still a strong prejudice against eunuchs and men who were not deemed "properly" masculine.

The Ethiopian eunuch most likely did not have a choice in being castrated because this was a common practice for kings and queens to surround themselves with people that would not be a threat to their rule. A eunuch would have been considered safe around women and safe against the temptation to rise up against the king or queen because he had no children to inherit his rule. To make things even more complicated, the eunuch was from Ethiopia which meant that he was black. That was another prejudice to overcome for the people of that time. Being black was not seen as an asset for that man.

Let's watch the Bible reading for today from Acts 8:26-38

https://youtu.be/On_7hql6hFg

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³² Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,

so he does not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

Despite all of the cultural blinders, Philip was able to see the soul of the eunuch because he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was open to higher wisdom that can see the truth of life beyond our limitations. Because of his witness to the Ethiopian eunuch, a strong church movement was started and developed in Ethiopia in Africa. The Ethiopian church today has about 45 to 50 million Christians who all trace their heritage back to that special encounter in the desert. Not only that, but they have a wealth of manuscripts of biblical writings that are yet to be translated. What an incredible difference one man’s action made for the whole world!

Philip was able to provide a spiritual home for a man who was not welcomed by others who could not see his soul. We are called to do the same. What might that kind of training for soul seeing look like for us today?

We need to remember that even though people are imperfect and make mistakes, they are still imprinted with the image of God, no matter how tarnished that image might be and we can bring more light to their lives by connecting with them on a soul level where all of our strife and divisions are transformed.

David Brooks suggests becoming intentional illuminators, people who see the light of others, offering a gaze that says, “I want to get to know you and be known by you.” Brooks suggests these features of the Illuminator’s gaze:

- **Tenderness:** Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being
- **Receptivity:** Overcoming insecurities and self-preoccupation and opening yourself up to the experience of another...You do not ask “How would I feel if I were in your shoes?” Instead, you are patiently ready for what the other person is offering.
- **Active Curiosity:** You want to have an explorer’s heart.
- **Affection:** We children of the Enlightenment live in a culture that separates reason from emotion...The human characters in the Bible are measured by how well they can imitate God’s affectionate way of knowing.
- **Generosity:** Generosity of spirit that helps us to see the humanity and soul of others.
- **A Holistic Attitude:** A great way to mis-see people is to see only a piece of them.

I would add another important practice to allow us to practice soul seeing and that is allowing ourselves the space and time to experience our own souls in the loving presence of God. When we are able to allow our own souls to emerge and to inform our egos, we can expand our vision from the narrow confines of the mind to embrace our superpower which is our soul. We are connected to the one who is the breath of all of life and we can have access to that wisdom through our connection to the soul.

Here is a process that I hope you will take with you home and practice. This is written by Gary Jansen as part of the Ignatian spirituality work.

“The soul is the spiritual part of who we are. Just as exercise and eating right help our physical bodies, and thinking right helps our mental and psychological states, spiritual practices like prayer and meditation help build our awareness of the soul.

All of us have thoughts throughout the day—thoughts of deadlines, our children, a parent’s health, or paying a bill might creep into the act at hand. These just came into my head: I never realized I liked the color yellow. Bees I get, but wasps? What purpose do they serve? I have to clean the dryer vent. What am I going to eat for lunch?

There were others too, but you get the picture.

So, this is what I want you to do. Listen to the voice inside your head right now. Take a moment to listen. Can you hear your thoughts?

Now, take a step back from your thoughts by answering this question: Who inside you is listening to the thoughts you are having? You are, right?

Stay with this for a moment. Pay attention to the part of you that is listening to your thoughts. You have a thought, but that thought isn’t you. There is someone or something that can observe that thought inside you.

Try this: Listen to the sound of someone’s voice or to a song you like. Or look at something in front of you, maybe a coffee cup. Just observe the music. Observe the coffee cup. Thoughts will creep into your head. That’s OK. Observe those thoughts, the music, the coffee cup.

Now, take another step back and observe the one inside you—the one following your thoughts, the music, or the coffee cup. Your soul is the observer. The true you, the you that transcends your body and mind, is your soul.

You are not your thoughts. You are not the voice inside your head.

You are the observer observing your thoughts. Not the fears you feel. Not the problems you have. All those change. The true you does not change. Your body gets older; you might acquire more knowledge; you might make more money or lose a job, but your soul never changes. You are always connected to something greater in all aspects of your life, mind, and body, but your soul has a very special connection to the Eternal.

Problems will come and go, and when they do, remind yourself that the real you is the observer who often forgets to be an observer.

How can we cultivate this awareness of the soul? How can we see things anew? Through meditation. Try some of these ideas to help you connect more with the observer that is your soul.

Regularly pay attention to the observer.

Every day when you wake up, meditate for a few moments, paying attention to how you feel and what you might be experiencing. If you see light streaming into your room, observe who is observing the light. If you're feeling stressed about the day ahead, focus on the observer watching the anxious thoughts that might flood your mind or feeling the tension in your neck or back. Acknowledge that problems don't affect the observer. Think of the beauty of the moon obscured by clouds. The moon still exists above the clouds regardless of what tries to block that glory. You, your soul, live above your problems.

Use your body.

Many of us have trouble sitting in one place for a long time. For those of us who get antsy, we can meditate while walking to work, exercising, running, or even doing our laundry. While moving our bodies, we can become conscious of our actions. Simply saying, "I am crossing the street," or, "I am breathing," or, "I am folding socks," is enough to help us focus on the present and get us out of our heads.

Experiment with breathing patterns.

If you use a standard four-count meditation method (breathing in and counting 1-2-3-4 and breathing out and counting 1-2-3-4), shake it up a bit. Instead of making your first breath an inhale, make it an exhale and then alternate breaths in and out on the four-count. Why do this? Our brains get used to patterns quickly, which is why most of us don't remember driving to work if we've been using the same route for years. Mixing up patterns occasionally, such as brushing our teeth with our less dominant hand, creates neural pathways that keep our brains healthy and alert. And it helps to make meditation more engaging as well."

May we continue to grow in listening to the voice of our eternal souls so that we may be able to see and love the souls of others as Jesus did. Amen.