

*Seeing the Invisible*

Mark 9:30-37; Psalm 1

Whitefish UMC

September 20, 2009

- † Scientists must have a name for it: the phenomenon that occurs when you've just bought a new car (even one that is used but new to you). Your recent acquisition causes you to suddenly notice all the other cars on the road that are made like yours—all of a sudden you begin to notice all the Subaru wagons or Chevy pick-ups—or whatever you've just acquired.
- † Why does that happen, I wonder? Are we programmed to observe things that reinforce our choices? Or is it just because we are seeing reflections of ourselves? I don't know.
- † An Episcopal priest tells this story about a fellow named Shanghai Pierce, who took this practice to an extreme:
- † His given name was Abel Head Pierce, but everyone knew him as Shanghai, Shanghai Pierce. He was born June 29, 1834, in New Hampshire, of all places. At age 17 he decided to stow away on a ship headed for Galveston, Texas, to seek, as it were, his fame and fortune. He had 75 cents in his pocket. When he arrived in Texas, he decided to promote his childhood nickname of Shanghai, referring to his resemblance to a Shanghai rooster, with his 6'4" frame like that of the long-legged breed of roosters.
- † From the very start, Shanghai Pierce began to work in the cattle business, bartering a year's work for \$200 worth of cattle to begin his own herd. After the year, he began branding stray cattle and building

his herd. In a short period of time, he had built a herd large enough to entitle him the appellation of cattle baron. He was quite a sight on the Texas plain, wearing brocaded vests, broad-brimmed, high-peaked hats. He even ordered his own gravesite statue prior to his death so that he could enjoy looking at himself. Supposedly, at sunset he would lift a glass to toast himself as he regaled, "Here's to old Shanghai!" If legend has any truth, his grandiose ego would make Donald Trump look as if he had an inferiority complex.

- † At his ranch, he decided to build a city with everything needed by his employees. He called the town Thank God, Texas, until some of his more refined friends convinced him that Blessing, Texas, had a better and more acceptable feel.
- † In his later years, Shanghai invited some of his friends from Boston to visit him on his ranch. He toured them throughout the complex, braggadociously noting his considerable accomplishments in developing this veritable city. As they rode through the dusty streets in a buggy driven by two white horses, Shanghai would point out the various landmarks. "Well, over there's the commissary. Best in the territory. And over there's the school. Two rooms, not one. And over there's the livery. The best blacksmith in the state of Texas. And over there is the saloon. Finest whiskey on this side of the Mississippi." And the list went on and on, as Shanghai puffed out his chest like his namesake rooster.
- † As they were continuing on Shanghai's tour, one of his guests spotted the steeple of a church set in a group of mesquite trees. He asked his host, "Shanghai, do you belong to that church?" Shanghai spat out

some tobacco juice and bellowed, "Hell, no! That church belongs to me." (Galloway)

- † Contrast that salty story with the story of Ralph Broetje and his family chronicled in the August 2009 *Costco Connection*. Their business, "FirstFruits of Washington," supplies the retail giant Costco with apples and cherries in season. "We're interested in bearing the fruit that will last," says Ralph, echoing the words of the Bible. And so the Broetje's donate up to 75 percent of their annual earnings to needy groups around the world.
- † They work hard for a successful harvest, but they are also dedicated to cultivating their employees. It wasn't always that way for them, though. In the 1980's, the Broetje's lost everything. So they moved to another town and started over, planting apple trees and then cherries in what had just been sagebrush.
- † At first the cherries didn't do well, but in prayer the Broetje's were called to give the cherries to a life-long dream of helping starving children in India. Faithful Christians, the family decided to refocus their efforts when the next year the cherries produced an unusually bountiful harvest.
- † At about the same time, the family went on a mission trip to an orphanage in Mexico. That trip coincided with a change in the labor market for those who picked their fruit from white seasonal workers to young male Latinos.
- † "We went down to Mexico to see if we could understand what was going on. What we saw was that these people were economic refugees. When we returned it changed how we looked at employees and what our role was as employer."

- † Did you hear that? The Broetje’s changed their way of seeing. And because they saw their workers differently, their whole business changed into a servant leadership model that put year-round work, daycare, education, and training for their workers first, and their own lifestyles second.
- † Next the family addressed the poor housing options that were offered their workers, which consisted mostly of living in their cars, garages, and other substandard setting. So they built Via Hermosa, consisting of 121 homes on their own property and funded affordable housing in nearby Pasco.
- † As if that wouldn’t be enough, the family pays special attention to each worker, encouraging them to identify their strengths and gifts for leadership and for their future. Then the business helps them to build up their best selves for however God calls them.
- † *“Then they (the disciples) came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’*
- † So which, then, of these two success stories reflects Jesus’ self in the mirror? Of course, the second one. It’s a heartwarming story. I confess that I cried when I read it one Saturday morning in August. And I never read the Costco magazine!!! (What’s going on here—I never read Parade magazine either—and now two sermon illustrations from them in a row!!!)
- † Yes, the story of FirstFruits of Washington is a perfect example of what Jesus was trying to convey to his friends. It’s a great story. But

- it feels beyond our reach, doesn't it? I know I could never do that much good, even with God's help, right?
- † But there I go, just like the disciples measuring themselves one against the other. I have a tendency to do that, and don't we all? We become so busy comparing ourselves to greatness that when we fall short in that comparison, we become discouraged and miss the point entirely.
  - † As if to say—"Okay, I see you don't get it, let me try this," Jesus takes a little child and puts that child—boy or girl—we don't know which because the Greek word for child is gender neutral—in the middle of them. He takes the child in his arms and says to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."
  - † Now we tend to sentimentalize this passage—to portray it on our Sunday School walls and drag it out on special days that honor children in the church. But even that is missing the point!
  - † It helps to remember that in Jesus' first century world, to almost all adults, and certainly to adult male disciples focused on their alpha male teacher and their measurable likeness to him, children were of no consequence. Children were *invisible*.
  - † As Mary Hinkle, writing in *Christian Century*, reminds us, in Luke 7, a Pharisee is scandalized when Jesus allows a woman, a known sinner, to wash his feet and anoint them with oil. Jesus says to the Pharisee, "Do you *see* this woman?"
  - † In a way, Jesus is saying the same to the disciples in today's passage. He scoops up a heretofore invisible child and embraces that child.

- The disciples want to know who gets it right, who is best, who best reflects Jesus, and Jesus responds with, “Do you see this child?”
- † As PHEME PERKINS remarks, “This example treats the child, who was socially invisible, as the stand-in for Jesus.” You know I love mysteries. There’s one by Sue Grafton in which the murderer turns out to be a 60-year old woman who is 30 pounds overweight.  
HMMMM.
  - † After the mystery is solved, the detective reminds herself that the woman nearly got away with murder simply because no one would remember seeing someone like her. Nothing about her made her noticeable. She was, for all practical purposes, invisible.
  - † No where is this phenomenon better illustrated than in a wonderful book I just finished, called The Elegance of the Hedgehog. It’s near the top of just about everybody’s “must read list” these days, and I finally got around to it.
  - † The story takes place in a luxury apartment building at a prestigious address in Paris. Its eight exclusive units are home to the upper echelons of French society, the elite in politics, finance, lifestyle, and education. The main character, Renee Michel, a concierge whose job it is to serve others better and richer than she, describes herself this way:
    - † “I am fifty-four years old...I am a widow, I am short, ugly, and plump, I have bunions on my feet and...I have always been poor, discreet, and insignificant. I live alone with my cat...”
  - † Nearly all of the inhabitants of the apartment building would never know that Madame Michel has a marvelous mind, a wry sense of humor, and an appreciation for fine art, in addition to possessing great

compassion. All they notice is her outward appearance, if they even see her at all.

- † They cannot appreciate and thus miss entirely, the elegance of this proverbial hedgehog, who is so good at hiding herself, because to be noticed might bring her even more pain than she has already suffered.
- † Oh there is so much more to this amazing book, but I will save it for later, if you're interested. But aren't there so many of us, who by virtue of past wounds and griefs, become invisible so as not to be hurt even more? On the other side there are some of us who are so insecure or self-absorbed that we call attention to ourselves in unhealthy and unhelpful ways.
- † And then there are those of us who feel as if we are like the dog who caught the car we've been chasing and just can't handle it all. Wherever we place ourselves, we mistake our place in God's kingdom by distracting ourselves from the real thing.
- † The real thing is this: to not worry about where we fit in the order of things—neither better nor worse than God sees us. And to view and treat others, no matter who they seem to be, as beloved and valued children of God—worthy of honor and respect and the radical love that Jesus leads us to give.
- † May we begin to see the invisible as if and because it is Jesus that we seek. May we see and serve whoever we can, wherever we can, whenever we can as we honor the one who sees us as we are and loves us more than anything. Amen.

Sources:

*Costco Connection*, August, 2009.

Muriel Barbery, The Elegance of the Hedgehog, Europa, 2006.

Mary E. Hinkle, "Seeing Things," <http://www.religiononline.org>

Dr. David Galloway, "Shanghaied," <http://day1.org>