

Sacred spectacles: Vision through specks and logs



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Jesus of Nazareth seemed especially concerned with vision. As a kind of "Seer," he magnified the centrality of sight —what we choose to see guides what we do. In my view, he wasn't so focused on believing correctly as he was on what we do with beliefs, how we act on the things we see. He encouraged his followers to pay attention, particularly to notice the most vulnerable people. If it was all about saving invisible souls, why would he wander around, getting his hands and feet dirty, to touch and teach, in a very visible world? If he was so otherworldly minded, why be human at all? As I see it, Jesus was less interested in supernatural things than natural things — like human beings.

In his book, "Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism," Baptist minister Brian Kaylor exposes how some believers are quick to point out the faults of others: "There's an urgent need to inter-

rogate logs in the eyes of our own groups rather than merely pointing out the specks (or even large logs) in the eyes of others." He refers to another of those "famous but forgotten" teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, where the Teacher speaks of a particular, and peculiar, kind of eyesight: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matthew 7:3-5). I've always found that image very funny, yet at the same time, seriously appropriate and perfectly accurate. The wisdom necessary to look in the mirror at those times we want to judge, seems to be rare. When we do notice our own hypocrisy (judging another from a condescending position), we potentially learn and become wiser, more empathetic. On reflection, I ask myself: is there a speck or a log in my eye? Maybe I should take care of that before staring at the perceived blurred vision of another.

There are countless examples of this. I heard a preacher shouting at a couple arriving for a serious health appoint-

ment. His judgment was cruel and showed great ignorance of the pain and suffering so obvious to those of us standing with the couple. As I saw it, the preacher was more concerned with the invisible (for instance, his god) than the visible reality — if he had the eyes to see, or the heart to feel, two people in need of compassion. If ever there was a prime example of someone blinded by "wooden glasses," this self-righteous preacher was one.

Couldn't Jesus have merely snapped his fingers from his heavenly throne to "save the world" or heal people? If he was, as many believe, the incarnation of God — the divine in human form — why teach anything? Instead, as the story is told, he chose not to look down on human frailty, but to look us in the eye. Some would say he came to show ultimate love, while others seem to believe he primarily came to judge. Some paint him as a hyper-masculine tough guy who had one thing in mind: to rule with an iron fist. Not sure where anyone finds that in the biblical text, but the muscular, super-human Jesus, is sure having his day.

When we rub our eyes to see more clearly, weary of what we see, can we re-focus our vision enough to weigh the

specks and logs? Is that dust in your eye? Are you blinded by something? Could it be your beliefs cloud your vision, making it look as if you can see better than someone else? Weather forecasters and airline pilots take reports seriously announcing "ten mile visibility" or "visibility zero." How far can our eyes see? If we can't even see ourselves, our own actions, our own judgments, how are we supposed to give any fair report on another person?

Before speaking in a local congregation, I used eyedrops to soothe my eyes. As I stood to speak, I realized there was some blurriness and I had to blink a number of times to clear my sight. What was supposed to help my vision actually caused it to be worse, at least for a moment. What opinions or beliefs put a film over our eyes, making it harder to see others as they are, without needing to change them, to make them wear the same glasses to see as we see?

Do we have a speck or a log problem? *Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).*