

The Ability to See Colors

John 3:14-21

Sight, as we all know, is a wondrous phenomenon. Most people take the ability to see for granted, since it is normal for them to open their eyes and immediately engage the world around them. Thanks to the art of optics, even a person like me with terrible eyesight from childhood can, with corrective lenses, see almost as well as those with perfect 20/20 vision.

However, one of the long-term effects of my retinal detachment last May has been reduced vision in limited light conditions. In the early morning or at dusk, or in a room dimly lit, it's much harder to make clear distinctions or contrasts between objects before me. So I stumble around a bit more, and when I drive after sunset, I rely on Wendy to be a second set of eyes until the darkness settles in well enough to where the headlights more effectively lighten the road (warning: don't walk the streets at dusk lest you become roadkill!). It's frustrating, to be sure, but it's also made me aware of what makes for clear vision.

Obviously, light plays a critical role in being able to see. We humans are deprived of nocturnal vision (compared to some of our animal friends), so we depend on light to expose what otherwise is hidden from us. Light not only brightens the landscape, it also provides us the ability to see color. Without light, there is no color.

The science of it is fairly simple and straight-forward. We have light-sensitive photoreceptors in our retinas shaped like they are called, cones and rods, which respond to the varying waves of light that are reflected off objects we see. Without light, those

photoreceptors are not stimulated, thus there is no perception of color.

Rods and cones complement each other. Rods allow us to see in very dim light, but they are not responsive to color, whereas cones allow us to see colors, but don't work as well in dim light. Hence, when it begins to get dark, you and I can still see, albeit in a diminished way, but in the process we lose our ability to distinguish between the colors of objects. Without some degree of light, we lose our ability not only to see colors, but also our ability to see at all.

Now my point is not to provide an elementary lesson on optics. Rather, there's something much deeper to ponder in the association between sight, color, and light if we reflect on it existentially, i.e., in our ability to live our personal lives well and to get along with each other as human beings. In other words, pretty basic stuff.

Yet, when we consider the diversity and vast range of differences between people, beginning, let's say, with the most obvious distinctions in race and appearance and continuing through to the colorful personalities and different points of view between individuals, we often are not mindful that the environment in which we find ourselves or the outlook and attitude we choose to have at any given time greatly influences how we perceive things, the choices we make, or how things will turn out. Do we see things clearly with insight and light cast upon a situation, or do we possess a dim view of things, perhaps mired in our own inner darkness, so that we see very little as it really is, depending more on preconceived judgments and reacting to perceived threats out of fear, irritation, and insecurity? Or

to keep the analogy, do we miss the colors of life because somehow it's become too dark to see them?

This came to mind during yet another news cycle of racial turmoil in Ferguson, MO, along with the egregious racist chants of fraternity boys in Oklahoma, as well as the ongoing threats and violence from ISIL, and the endless carping partisanship in Washington, among other things. On a personal basis, I suppose it also applies to relational conflicts, personality clashes, and irritation toward people who are frustrating or annoying, or to situations that can't be changed. We all know better, but when you allow yourself to expect the worst in people or in situations, it's usually the only thing you'll see.

It strikes me how much the notion of spiritual lightness and darkness factor into this ability to see things clearly and accurately. The symbolism that so much crime and violence occurs at night isn't lost on me—so much of what we perceive as evil occurs in the shadows, literally or figuratively, intending not to be seen. In a similar way, it is difficult for race relations to improve when human emotions are darkened by feelings of insecurity, fear, and anger. When the social or political environment grows dim, people don't see very clearly and react to alarm. Every color that isn't your own looks the same in dim light; individual distinctions aren't made because they're not perceived. This is how stereotypes take shape—how prejudices blind us. When darkness deepens and fear rises, tribal instincts take over and race matters. In the darkness of the mind and heart, survival is paramount, reducing everything to “us” against

“them.” It doesn’t take much of a flashpoint to make things worse or to scapegoat certain groups.

But, on the other hand, it’s also true that when people are optimistic and hopeful, when they’re encouraged, energized, and feeling well, when there is a lightness of being, it is much easier to respond openly and favorably to others, particularly when psychological and social thresholds have to be crossed in order to meet. When positive images are present (instead of negative stereotypes and portrayals), crossing racial lines is a much friendlier, more inviting, fruitful and constructive endeavor. More often than not, when others are seen for who they are (not just in their annoying caricatures that get magnified when we’re angry), we usually discover there are many reasons to be gracious and friendly, if not embrace them as friends.

At so many levels of life, as human beings, we need to be continually reminded of the importance of light to our sense of wellness—spiritually, morally, and existentially—a brightness of spirit, lightness of being, of becoming enlightened, of seeking insights, of shedding light on every situation, and of drawing upon the eternal light of God in our lives. For lightness is what helps us to see others clearly and enjoy their true colors.

This sense of lightness is how I choose to interpret our passage today from John 3, with its binary portrayal of lightness and darkness in the world that begins at the first chapter and continues on into our morning text. For me, the light that shines in the darkness is not merely a religious cliché, but an existential need for all of humanity for our individual and collective wellbeing.

What is this “light” which plays such a central role? In an ancient worldview, the notions of “light” and “life” were virtually synonymous. To possess life was to possess light; to lose one’s life was to quench the light within. John’s notion of lightness was comparable to what we declare when we refer to lightness of being—a pure heart, an honest mind, a gracious spirit transmitted light.

This was identified in specific ways by the ancients. Not only did the ancients believe that human sight was due to the light that was within a person emanating through their eyes (thus, enabling them to see the world around them), in the same manner, those who were physically blind were so because of moral darkness within them. There was no light within them to shine out through their open eyes. Obviously, we know that’s not true and would easily correct that ancient notion based on the science of optics and our modern sensibilities. But their conceptual link between darkness and lightness as moral and spiritual realities actually was not too far off the mark.

Speaking metaphorically, there is a bit of a spectrum between spiritual lightness and darkness with gradations that exist in each of us. When we’re in a good place, a lightness of being exists that is quite different than when we are in a dark place. A lightness of being expresses a sense of security, of optimism, of hopefulness, of energy, levity, brightness of spirit, selflessness and trust toward others, and an eagerness to engage the world constructively and generously. Whereas, those who are suffer in darkness tend to be more jaded, cynical, critical, unhappy, anxious, upset, irritable, coarse, and mean-spirited. If it becomes a constant in their life, then people trend

toward narcissism, hedonism, and violent words and deeds. Deep darkness as a psycho-spiritual pattern is often sadistic, sometimes masochistic, and usually antisocial—perhaps, even taking a sinister delight in the suffering of others. How I’m addressing it here is only metaphorical, of course; there are more therapeutic ways of describing this. But my point is to relate all of this back to the imagery in our text.

The distinction I just made between lightness and darkness is how I would see it in this passage (and, in many respects, throughout the Gospel), though I admit, it is not how it usually gets interpreted. Traditionally, many interpreters view the entire scheme of lightness versus darkness theologically, as a condition of redemption or sinfulness, all based on one’s personal relationship to Christ, i.e., as the difference between Christians and everyone else—those who are redeemed by Christ and those who are not. Despite how commonly this notion is found in Christianity, I object to this reading of it on the premise that this kind of theology only reinforces tribal division and rivalry between religious traditions, laying the groundwork for holy wars, with religious fanatics of all stripes claiming they are enlightened while all others are condemned in their darkness. Of course, religious tribalism has been the bane of human civilization. In addition, this imagery in John has also been used to justify various forms of racism down through the centuries. In other words, we need to be careful how we are interpreting sacred texts.

In my opinion, as Christians we ought to reexamine our theology whenever we make exclusive theological claims about anyone’s destiny and their state of grace—who’s in and who’s out.

That's presumptuous to begin with and self-serving in the end. On many levels, it's contrary to Jesus' message, which was intended to heal these kinds of tribal divisions in the world, not perpetuate them.

Instead, the distinction I see between lightness and darkness is not a theological claim, but a spiritual reality *within* people—a psycho-spiritual reality that exists in everyone—one that is often determined by the choices we make and the influences we choose to follow. It seems to me the choice John 3:16 offers is not over who we believe Jesus was, as much as it is an invitation to follow his ways and teachings and example, which lead us on the moral and existential path God intends all humans to take: to be truly loving, caring, generous, just—yet merciful, gentle, kind, and selfless beings with a sense of mutual trust, security, and peaceable-ness that reflects a lightness of spirit and being—a way of being that is not merely inspired by Christian beliefs and teachings. To follow John's later point, Jesus shows us the way that leads to life and truth; becoming like Christ is what generates the spiritual lightness within us, reflected in the desire to form right-relations in life.

This is what I believe John 3:16 actually means for us today—that it's not a theological formula for becoming a Christian (at the exclusion of all other religious or philosophical traditions), as much as it is making a fundamental and hopeful claim about life. What is this claim? That, even in the midst of endless moral darkness, God so loves the *entire* world (not just a select part of it) that God's own light is explicitly (though not exclusively) revealed in Jesus: that those who commit and conduct their own lives willfully to this way are, by virtue

of their loving and transparent manner, opening their eyes to the light and life of eternity within them!

For God so loved the world that God offered Jesus [God's chosen One], that whoever chooses and embraces his way will not perish in their destructive patterns, but will have eternal light!

The corollary is, those who do not choose the way of lightness and goodness, mercy and love, will invariably create their own hell (which they do), inflicting it upon others and adding to the darkness of the world. Inspiring a path toward enlightenment is a universal need and choice, not limited to any specific religious tradition or culture.

Ultimately, it comes down to a matter of each person's will—to follow the way toward lightness of being and moral transparency, or to choose the path toward darkness along the course of life. In Christianity, we're not to be gatekeepers for an exclusive way to heaven; we're God's emissaries inviting people to follow the light of eternity within them and helping them to embrace the light instead of darkness. Instead of reducing it to an exclusive Christian destiny, it's as a profound statement on the character and choice for every human soul.

Why not? The more light there is on this earth, the brighter the world will be. The better and more selfless choices people make, the less suffering there will be for us all. The fewer obstacles that prevent people from experiencing the blessings and graces of life, the easier it will be to brighten the landscape of our lives and of our world. When the light of eternity shines abundantly, then we are able to see so much more of life than when we are dwelling only on the dark side.

Likewise, we can experience and value the complexity of colors in every shade, hue, and saturation that are found in people and in the expanse of all of nature. When our spirits are light, we can feel secure in the goodness of life and grace, appreciating and embracing the presence of God's own Spirit and the vitality of it all.

When you think about it, to choose otherwise makes no real sense, does it? Without light, there is no color. Without light, we cannot see. As the Sage so rightly put it: "Without vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). Without the ability to see as God would have us perceive the world around us, life amounts to little more than a temporal battle for survival of the fittest. We can do better, for ourselves and for all. We can embrace the light of eternity and grasp the extraordinary beauty reflected in the magnificent colors of life.

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15 March 2015