

“Known, Seen, Called”  
1 Samuel 3:1-10; Ps 13:1-6;13-18 and John 1:43-51  
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January 14, 2018

This week Turner Classic movies has been re-running  
the Oscar-winning bio-pic of the life of Mahatma Gandhi.  
If you watch that channel, you may have noticed  
that whoever puts the schedule together  
has an almost uncanny knack for picking films  
that fit the present moment, even the current news cycle.  
Choosing the movie Gandhi for this week, though,  
was probably decided months ago, since tomorrow is the day  
the nation honors Martin Luther King Jr.  
King was greatly formed by the two pillars of Gandhi’s thought,  
truth and non-violent resistance.  
Non-violent resistance, in Gandhi’s view, was in no way passive.  
Formed in suffering, it was the most powerful force for good on earth.  
Both King and Gandhi were convinced  
that truth and nonviolence will always prevail over evil and deceit,  
no matter how improbable that may seem,  
or how powerful the purveyors of evil and deceit may be.  
King’s use of non-violent resistance was the foundation  
of the Civil Rights movement in the United States,  
and led to whatever progress we as a nation have  
made in the last six decades in the realm of race relations.

I tremble to think what King or Gandhi might say to us today  
about the racial tensions of our time.  
It has sickened me to see the reemergence of bigotry in American life,  
the protected place bigotry has gained in some circles,  
and not simply racial bigotry but bigotry of other kinds as well.  
Sadly, it seems necessary to add that  
I wrote those words last week before  
the headlines about the president’s use of an expletive  
to describe whole nations.

So it feels especially crucial today to acknowledge  
Martin Luther King Jr’s memory  
and name the link between his legacy and his Christian faith.  
For though Gandhi was a compelling influence on King’s life,  
his first influence was Jesus Christ.

All of our texts on this second Sunday of Epiphany  
have to do with what lies behind bigotry of every kind:  
the failure to see and know other people as they are.

Being seen and known by others as we really are  
is key to whole and happy life.

It's been a joy to watch my son and his wife  
form this foundation for their baby daughter.

Each sound, each movement, each babble she makes  
they mirror back to her, and so do we when we're there.  
This seeing and mirroring is something parents do naturally,  
and it has been shown to be absolutely crucial  
to a child's healthy development.

The opposite, the constant message  
that who and what you are is a problem,  
quickly leads to inner despair.

"People know about the Klan and the overt racism,"  
the actor Samuel L. Jackson once said,  
"but the killing of one's soul little by little, day after day,  
is a lot worse than someone coming in your house  
and lynching you."

Jesus' life was taken by those who did not see who he was.

The graffiti that was carved above his head in Latin: INRI  
*Jesu Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum*, Jesus Christ King of the Jews,  
that graffiti was meant to be the highest form of mockery.  
He was lumped into the terrorist/trouble-makers  
and summarily put to death by a state  
that was certain they had not just the power  
but the responsibility to rid the nation of types like him,  
rabble-rousers from latrines like Nazareth.

The decision makers thought they were protecting the nation.  
They were wrong.

All our scriptures today assert  
that right seeing and knowing of another begins in God.

In the story from First Samuel the narrator tells us outright  
that Samuel did not yet know God, meaning  
he had never had an encounter with God of his own.

But God knows Samuel and calls to him in the night until he answers.

This is first thing for us to hear about God's knowing us:

God does not assess our circumstances in the same ways we do:  
"I am too young, I'm too tired, I'm too unskilled, I'm too unready";  
and the second is

God does not give up calling out our name until we answer.

The priest Eli, who had had *many* encounters  
with the Holy One of Israel, teaches the boy  
what he is to say, and what we are to say,  
when God calls out to us:

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

That wonderful story is paired with perhaps the most beautiful Psalm we’ve been given about being made, seen and known by God. There is no moment in the day, no posture we can strike, no language we can use, no journeys we can take that will ever remove us from God’s sight and knowledge. This knowledge of us, this total seeing and knowing God has, “is too wonderful for me writes the poet.” confessing that he can’t understand it or even take it in. The appropriate response is praise, thanks, awe and wonder.

In John’s gospel the seeing and knowing is done by *Jesus* and it attracts people to him instantly.

Think how appealing it is to meet somebody who connects with you completely, who makes *you* feel really seen and understood.

Many of us may go days or even months at a time feeling unseen by other people.

Maybe we even like it that way if what we want or hope for has come to seem foolish or pointless to us.

In a scene that we don’t get to watch something happened to Philip the moment he met Jesus and he in turn searches out his friend Nathaniel, wanting him to meet Jesus, too.

Nathaniel comes, scoffing all the way.

For how can anything good come from a place like Africa, or Haiti, or Nazareth. Jesus, probably laughing, announces that Nathaniel is someone who tells it like it is.

“Where did you get to know me?” Nathaniel asks, And, for my money there is astonished longing in the question.

Then the exchange about seeing him under a tree happens. Jesus might simply be saying “I just saw you over there,” but Nathaniel reacts with an intense sense of being valued that, again, may have led Jesus to smile while saying the equivalent of “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

The entire exchange is framed by the invitation “Come and see.”

In our story it is spoken by Philip.

In the story just before this, it is said by Jesus himself. Come and see. According to theologian and pastor David Lose the statement “Come and see” forms the heart, not simply of this opening scene, but of much of John’s Gospel, across whose pages “... are women and men, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, powerful and vulnerable, people of all shapes and sizes and varieties that Jesus meets.

And to each one, in one way or another, he says the same thing:  
Come and see. Come and see God do a new thing.  
Come and see your future open up in front of you.  
Come and see the grace of God made manifest  
and accessible and available to all.”

John builds his gospel this way, says Lose,  
to offer *us* the chance to see the variety and kinds of people  
Jesus reaches out to, so that we might reach out to them as well.<sup>i</sup>

When we do *not* see, or do *not* try to know  
we easily fall into patterns of discrimination and bigotry.  
Part of what these stories given to us in epiphany—  
the season of light, when God reveals what life is about—  
surely part of what these stories are saying is that  
God’s calls us to be people who see as God sees.  
Created in God’s image, it is who are formed  
in our mother’s womb’s to be, people of encounter,  
of invitation, of welcome, who do not look with the eyes but with the heart.  
Many chapters on the adult Samuel  
will be sent by God to a nothing place called Bethlehem  
to anoint a boy named David,  
and God will say those very words about looking on the heart  
to the man who is only a boy today,  
alert and listening in the dark.

Beloved, there are other voices in the dark,  
voices that distort our ability to know,  
that teach that we are not to look on the heart in other people  
or try to know them as they really are.  
“No!” say such voices, filled with more than a little fear.  
“We need to judge based on surface things,  
such as skin color, or national heritage  
or gross domestic product if it’s less than our own.”

Father Richard Rohr sounded almost like John Calvin  
to me this week when I read him telling the truth  
about how easily these voices can seduce us:  
“Most Christian ‘believers’”, Rohr writes, “tend to echo  
the cultural prejudices and worldviews  
of the dominant group in their country,  
with only a minority revealing any real transformation  
of attitudes or consciousness.  
It has been true of slavery and racism, classism and consumerism  
and issues of immigration and health care for the poor.”

Because I am afraid that Father Rohr is right about our weaknesses  
I ask myself, and you, on this Martin Luther King Jr weekend,

what voices have we listened to in the past  
 and what voices will we follow tomorrow?  
 “Were you like Samuel [and me], a church kid,  
 who knew the language of faith and lived in the shadow of ministry  
 until a divine call cut through all the church-speak  
 and religious noise to rouse you from your slumber?  
 Were there more seasoned saints around to help you on the way, [like Eli,]  
 to guide you and help clarify the voices your heart?  
 Maybe you were more like Philip in John’s gospel:  
 just minding your own business [when somehow]  
 the irresistible face of Christ got all up in your daily doings.  
 The next thing you know you’re telling others all about it  
 and inviting them to come see.  
 Perhaps you’re [more] of a skeptic like Nathanael who [still] asks  
 ...whether anything good can come out of Nazareth.  
 The point is—[we] are here. Some [voice in the night or the bright daylight]  
 got a hold of [our] hearts, [our] minds, [our] hopes.  
 For some reason we all keep coming back.”<sup>ii</sup>  
 So we need to know who’s voice we’re going to listen for,  
 the voice of fear or the voice of the Holy One of Israel and Jesus Christ,  
 who made us and sees us and knows us through and through,  
 to whom we will answer no matter how dark the night  
 “Speak, Lord for your servant is listening!”

If you fear the voice of God in Christ may be too hard to find  
 then hear another story from this past week.  
 Susan Baily posted it on her Facebook page.  
 In honor of Martin Luther King Jr’s legacy  
 her first graders spent some time this week looking at eggs.  
 One was white, one was light brown,  
 and one was a beautiful dark brown with lots of little spots.  
 They talked about how they looked different  
 and then opened the eggs up to see they were all the same inside.  
 They opened some plastic eggs with character traits inside.  
 Susan pointed out that you can’t tell by looking at the outsides  
 which eggs would have good character traits or bad.  
 Finally, they read a book about Martin Luther King Jr.  
 and had a talk connecting his dream of being judged  
 by the content of our character  
 instead of the color of our skin to the egg activity.  
 She asked her beautiful first graders what they had learned.  
 “We should share kindness equally” one little voice replied.  
 Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> David Lose, pastor of Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis and former president of Lutheran Theologian Seminary in Philadelphia. <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-2-b/>

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<sup>ii</sup> I have adapted these remarkable words from an article by the Reverend Sharon Bezard entitled **The Call**, January 15, 2015. Everything in brackets has been added by me. Her article was published online in 2015 by the Stewardship of Life Institute and found online at <http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2015/01/the-call/>