

Presbyterian Presbyopia
John 1:43-51
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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While Googling the word “Presbyterian,” I discovered a new word: “presbyopia.” So I went to Wikipedia and read the following:

“Presbyopia describes the condition where the eye exhibits a progressively diminished ability to focus on nearby objects with age...the first symptoms most people notice are difficulty reading fine print...eyestrain...(and)...blurred vision.”

No surprise here, the older you get the fuzzier your vision. I just think it’s amusing the word for deterioration of your eyesight sounds like an exclusively Presbyterian disease.

Since our annual congregational meeting immediately follows worship this morning it makes sense to preach a sermon on vision. In The Book of Proverbs there’s the warning “without vision the people perish.” It’s true isn’t it? If you lack vision, you lack purpose, if you lack purpose you have nothing to live for, if you have nothing to live for, you become empty, selfish and useless. This is true for individuals, businesses and certainly the Church. Without a focused vision, a church can become empty, selfish and useless.

For the young and idealistic vision always seems clear and definite, but unless we grow wiser as we get older, you lose your vision. Yes presbyopia is a physical condition, but it’s also a spiritual condition. You can look at nearby, familiar “objects,” like the scriptures or your relationships with God and your neighbor but not see them as clearly as you should. So take a reality check, test your vision, make sure you see what God sees. That’s the secret for good vision, allowing God to see through your eyes so you can clearly see yourself, your family, your career, your discipleship and your church.

In John’s gospel we see Jesus’ almost playful interviewing technique that enables him to see the character and potential of the men he called to discipleship.

Jesus already had conversations with Phillip, who told his friend Nathanael, “We found the one Moses and the prophets wrote about, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

Right away Nathanael’s presbyopia caused him to smugly ask, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Apparently Nathanael saw Nazareth as a low rent district filled with low class people. But very quickly Phillip, whose conversations with Jesus already opened his eyes, responded, probably with a knowing smile, “Come and see.”

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching he grandly announced, again probably with a smile, “Here is truly an Israelite without deceit!” Nathanael naturally curious asked, “How do you figure that, we never met before?”

Then Jesus mysteriously answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip called you.”

What does that mean? In the Old Testament the phrase “waiting under a fig tree” meant preparing even dreaming for God to redeem his people. Somehow Jesus’ insight struck a chord with Nathanael prompting him to boldly proclaim, “Rabbi! You are the Son of God and the King of Israel.” Nathanael’s presbyopia was cured!

Unfortunately a quick read of the gospels and your own experience tells you presbyopia is not always cured as quickly as Nathanael's. If people won't admit they have presbyopia and refuse therapy, their vision becomes so fuzzy they go blind, even if they're religious.

Remember Jesus' denunciation of the religious leaders of Israel? "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees...Woe to you blind hypocrites...you blind fools!" (Matthew 23: 16,17)

The Pharisees were religious men with a bad case of presbyopia. They couldn't or wouldn't see God working through Jesus. They accused Jesus of breaking their rules and even worse, keeping company with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners. Not surprisingly by opposing Jesus the Pharisees unintentionally isolated themselves and lost the good will of the people.

Maybe their first mistake was choosing the name Pharisee which in English means "separated," again giving the unintentional message they were an exclusive club. But here's the paradox, even though the Pharisees were a "separated," faith community they gladly welcomed anybody, even the repentant tax collector who said, "I'm really interested in joining your community and living within your values and culture. What do I have to do to become a member?" But that didn't happen too often.

I once pointed out the words Presbyterian and Pharisee both begin with the letter "p." It's easy for us to diagnose their presbyopia, not so easy (or gratifying) diagnosing our own. But the parallels between them and us are insightful.

As unintentionally as the Pharisees, Presbyterians and most other denominations send the same message: our churches are exclusive clubs, with this primary directive: self-preservation. It's true, so much of our energy and resources are spent keeping the institution going. The unintentional message to outsiders? Our church only cares about itself.

Understandably in today's environment most denominations are preoccupied with self-preservation. Hard economic times, shrinking budgets and membership threaten many congregations. So the challenge for us is balancing self-preservation with our vision statement "Bringing Christ to People," when most people choose to not belong to any church.

For several years we've been trying to come up with a strategic plan to reach out into the community with a ministry that will impact our neighbors' quality of life. Then, at last year's congregational meeting the session announced Babcock received an unexpected large bequest with only one condition: the money be used to establish an after school ministry to the children in the community. In this case, God's timing and provision were both a generous gift and an awesome responsibility. But it's also an opportunity that can trigger the process of transforming Babcock into a missional church.

What's a missional church? Think of the missionary outposts you heard about in Sunday School when you were children. Christian missionaries in far away places reaching out and serving people, making friends with them, teaching their children, attending their needs, and telling them all about Jesus.

Let's be realistic. If we want Babcock to continue to be a presence in this community, we can't sit back and wait for people to come to us because they're not coming. So, we go to them. How? Maybe we partner with the Loch Raven Village Association and with their help discern the needs of the community and work with them

to meet them. We've already establishing a relationship with Pleasant Plains Elementary School that opens up a lot of opportunities for Christian outreach. Like Nathanael, we need to be waiting under our fig tree, preparing and dreaming of ways God can use us to reach out and serve the people around us.

The Church in America is going through a period of transition, some would call it hard times. It's not like it used to be, but it's not supposed to be like it used to be. Time marches on.

By the grace of God we live in these times and have to play the cards we've been dealt. But you know what? These aren't just hard times, they're especially exciting times. Even with all the fast paced changes happening before our eyes and under our noses, even with a sick economy and a broken world, we have good news to celebrate: God is good and God always provides the vision, the resources and the opportunity to continue what those bold first century Christians started 2,000 years ago. We are empowered to change the world if only because Christ has already overcome it. One thing I've learned, if God wants something to happen it will, if God calls us to do it, we can. This new year can be the start of something wonderful, bold, and exciting. All I ask, at this time, is you let God open your eyes so you can see God working through each one of us.

And finally, let's not worry about Babcock. Instead be concerned about the people "out there" who need to be told God loves them. Let's commit to being transformed by the Spirit so we can become both disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ in our corner of God's Kingdom.