

Matthew 7:15-20
Trust Your Eyes
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

There are googly eyes on our bulletins this morning and also on the communion table. You should know, googly eyes are a close second to glitter for me. But that isn't why they are present for worship today. These googly eyes are to give us a visual as we think about the times in which our eyes alone cannot be trusted. Andrew, my youngest son, learned that early. He was one of those kiddos who was a bit of a bull in a china shop. He would often knock over drinks at the supper table, not just his own, but other people's too. He touched absolutely everything everywhere we went. My parents had glass things sitting on the tables in their living room. Having Andrew at their house was always stressful for me. He went from table to table touching the glass while I tried to stay a step ahead of him, anticipating what was next and moving it. Honestly, though, I didn't think much of it. I've known and loved lots of children who wreaked havoc wherever they went. At the time, Andrew didn't seem any different.

He loved it when someone read to him. Because his older brother is 7 years older, there was always someone around who would read his favorite stories to him. When the time came for him to learn to read, he struggled. We imagined that he was thinking to himself, "Why read when others will do it for you?" He was the baby after all. When he started school, learning to write was a challenge as well. He didn't seem to be able to make up his mind whether he wanted to be left or right-handed, so he did a little of both.

At the end of first grade, he still wasn't reading on his own much. He got frustrated easily. I worked with him all summer long and he didn't improve markedly, though we had graduated to reading Harry Potter together, so I was enjoying the books more. When he started 2nd grade, I talked to his teacher and told her I was worried something more than "he's the youngest in his class and the baby of the family," was going on. By October, the reading specialist was baffled, and his teacher was out of ideas. So, because I didn't know what else to do, I took him to the eye doctor, though he had passed his vision tests at school and hadn't complained about not being able to see.

I'm so grateful I did. We learned that Andrew's eyes had never learned to work together. It's called binocular vision dysfunction.

On the right side of the screen is an example of how the vision of a person with BVD is impacted. When we are born, our eyes must learn to work together and

most of us have eyes and a brain that do that naturally. Some of us, though, need some help. Andrew needed help. From arm's length in, he saw two overlapping images of everything. And he had no reason to think that wasn't normal. Imagine seeing two overlapping glasses next to your plate. Though he couldn't tell us, he learned not to trust his eyes, which is why he touched everything. I am happy to report, through vision therapy and hours of vision exercises, Andrew's eyes learned to work together. By Christmas break that 2nd grade year, he was reading above grade level.

Most of us don't struggle like Andrew did. Most of us, in fact, learn to rely heavily on what our eyes tell us. According to the National Institute of Health, 65% of us are visual learners.¹ While this is true, there are times when, even when our eyes are functioning perfectly, we are fooled. Optical illusions are one example of that. Optical illusions are images or pictures we perceive differently than they really are. There are street artists who use sidewalk chalk to create incredible optical illusions and it is fascinating. Here's how it's done:

***Video :12-1:40**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjibvFXbOLw>

I remembered another example of being fooled by what we think we see. It's in a scene in the first Jurassic Park movie. Characters are in a vehicle being chased by a t-rex.

The camera shows the vehicle's side mirror in which the audience can see the t-rex running after the vehicle. On the mirror is imprinted, "objects are closer than they appear." The audience sees what's in and on the mirror just as the t-rex catches up to the vehicle. What we think we see isn't always what is true.

This morning's text, part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, has come along to remind us that life is full of opportunities in which we must decide whether our senses, our eyes and ears specifically, are telling us the truth. This is a great text for Graduation Sunday because each one of these graduates is about to embark on a new season of life in which they will be exposed to all kinds of situations and all kinds of people. They will have to decide whether to believe what they see on the surface or whether further investigation is warranted. There is no magic

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4340450/#:~:text=In%20the%20general%20population%2C%20the,%25%20auditory%20and%205%25%20kinesthetic>, accessed 5/20/23.

formula for that. Mostly, life experience is a great teacher, but this text offers some help. This is Matthew 7: 15-20.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

The author of Matthew formulated Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as an extended teaching time, covering a lot of topics that don’t seem related. The common thread is that the topics all speak to what it means to be Jesus’ disciple. “If you are going to be my disciple, you need to know these things and take them to heart.” We need to remember the author of Matthew was writing a full generation after Jesus’ death. He was not one of Jesus’ original disciples. He was not there to hear with his own ears or see with his own eyes what Jesus was saying or doing. He was trying to hold together a community of people who were a community because of what they believed about Jesus. They were expecting him to return in their lifetime and when he returned, he would fix everything that was wrong.

This community, though, was exposed to other voices as well. This section of the Sermon on Mount deals with helping that early Christian community sort out which voices to believe, specifically which voices to listen to about Jesus, God, and God’s ways. Among the voices in the ears of this fledgling community were undoubtedly some who didn’t think Jesus was the Messiah and probably some for whom the God of Israel was not the focus of their worship or faith. Maybe some who were polytheistic and heavily influenced by the traditions of the Romans.

And I would imagine these other voices were pretty convincing at times. Human beings argue a lot about what the right things to believe are, especially when it comes to religion. Wars are fought, countries divided, and even families are torn apart all because people disagree about who and what is sacred and how those beliefs ought to impact how we live, both as individuals and in community. This is one of the reasons people are fleeing organized religion. At times, churches seem more focused on words, doctrines, and right belief than on actually living out what we say we believe about God and human beings.

The help this text offers us as we navigate a world in which we encounter people who believe all different things about God, is that we can know the real truth about a person by observing what their life produces. In the language of this morning's text, we can know a person's heart by the kind of fruit they produce, good fruit or bad fruit? Perhaps as we ask the answer to this question about other people, we ought to wonder the same about our own lives. Are our lives producing good fruit?

The first question we need to answer then is, what is good and what is bad when it comes to the fruit of our lives? It occurs to me that, at its root, this question really asks, what kind of world do we want to live in? Or maybe, what kind of world do we think God intended for us to live in? Our lives either bring that world closer to reality or not. When what we do with our lives gives us and others a glimpse of that world, we are bearing good fruit.

And I think we are born with a longing for the world as it should be. Sadly, this longing can be squelched, and it often is, to our own detriment and the world's. We are born longing for connection. We are born free from guilt and shame. We are born unafraid. But false prophets, in many forms, teach us we must not depend on other people for anything. We can and should take care of ourselves. Look out for number one, they say. All that matters is our own salvation, our own personal Lord and Savior. These same false prophets teach us we are inherently sinful and ought to be ashamed of who we are and who we are growing to be. And they teach us to fear people who aren't like us and to fear what we do not understand. We were born to love and be loved, but many of us receive the message that we aren't worth loving and this makes it nearly impossible for us to fully love other people. Those messages are given to us by the false prophets of capitalism, religion, trauma, addiction, mental illness, and even well-meaning people who love us.

If we long for a world in which people love one another and all of creation, then voices that speak hatred and fear into the universe are producing bad fruit. This hatred and fear are bad for us and for the world we want to bring into being. If we long for a world that understands that we are all connected, then ways of being that are divisive, and that "other" groups of people are examples of bad fruit. These ways of being are bad for us and for the world we want to bring into being.

If we long for a world in which all people are free to be who they were created to be, then policies and legislation that diminish the humanity of anyone and do not protect the most vulnerable, are examples of bad fruit. These policies and legislation are bad for us and for the world we want to bring into being.

Our eyes and our ears will always help us sort out bad fruit from good fruit. But honestly, our hearts will have to do most of the work. It is our hearts that long for the world to be different. So, it is our hearts that will let us know when we are moving toward it. This week I read a quote I've been pondering, "If you want to know someone's mind, listen to their words. If you want to know their heart, watch their actions." Maybe we need to hone the partnership between our senses and our hearts. Look for a person's heart. Search your own heart from time to time and listen to it.

Graduates (and really all of us), as you embark on the next part of your journey, train yourself to look for the fruit...in your own life and in the lives of other people. There will be people who try to tell you that good fruit will be found in acquiring money and possessions. Look at what they do with what they have acquired. Think about what you will do with what is yours. Will it make the world more loving and more equitable? Will it ease suffering? Or will it only make your life more comfortable?

There will be people, especially in higher education, who believe that good fruit will be found in diplomas and degrees. Look at what they do with their education. Think about what you will do with yours. Will it make you more compassionate? Will it help you understand your neighbors? Will it inspire you to use what you have learned to heal a world that is broken?

These are big questions for all of us. Every single day we make the choice, will we use our resources, whatever they are, to bring about healing and wholeness? Honestly, some days we will see clearly the good fruit we produce, and we will feel it in our hearts. And some days we will be grateful each sunrise gives us another chance to try again. I wish for you, dear graduates, that you will greet each day as the gift that it is and that you will remember you have something special to give to this world and the world needs it. You all give me hope in the good fruit to come and in a world yet to be seen. Amen.