

"Seeing the Good"

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There's a saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing again and again while expecting different results. Similarly, it could be described as doing the same thing again and again, knowing what the result will be, but choosing to do it anyway.

Breaking out of that pattern isn't easy.

Many of us who choose things that aren't good for us while knowing they won't make us happy or improve our lives do them anyway because that's all we know.

Others of us might expect that one day these fruitless actions will suddenly bear fruit.

I've mentioned before that one of my biggest pet peeves these days is when people say that something they just witnessed or read about had restored their faith in humanity. It bugs me because they say it about *any* kind thing that people do—things that I would certainly hope that most people would do if they saw a person or an animal in danger.

Other variations of this declaration are when people tell me how happy they are to see a nice story in the paper because usually all they see is bad news. I write feature stories. Ninety-nine percent of what I write is good news—or at least neutral news. But people don't see that, and they must also not see the lifestyle stories that all the other newspapers or news networks or magazines put out. If they did, I often think to myself, then they wouldn't constantly need their faith to be restored, because they would already see the good. But, it seems, many people can't see the good even if they themselves do good.

The biggest irony to me is that the comment sections under these videos or online stories can be filled to the brim with lovely comments from people praising the story or video and spreading good will, and yet these are the same people spreading cynicism in the future of humanity.

So, what can be done? We must break out of the cycles we've been in.

Maybe it's breaking free from a food or exercise plan that might have worked for you at one time but isn't working now.

Maybe it's ridding yourself of a toxic friend or acquaintance.

Maybe it's learning to notice the good in the world when, before, all you saw was the bad. Or maybe it's helping someone else in your life see the good.

The more attention I gave this question, the more I started to feel for those people. How trapped they must feel in their lives not to see the good being done around them. The people who give to charity. The people who call 911 when they see an accident on the road. The people who see a child wandering in a store or in the park and look around to see where their parents might be and try to determine if that child needs help.

How weighed down those people who can't see good in the world must be by their relationship struggles or financial struggles to have lost their faith in humanity in the first place. Maybe they don't

have a program of faith like we do. Maybe they used to, but somewhere along the way, they lost their faith. Or maybe they've surrounded themselves by the wrong people.

This Advent, I challenge each of us to identify a way in which we have been stuck in the repetitive actions of the past and repent over the insanity of our decisions so we can move forward into sanity and serenity.

Advent is a time of preparation. We're waiting for a savior to come and guide us toward forgiveness. We're joyfully expecting new life, and we're looking for a way to leave the past behind and look, instead, toward the future.

Now is the perfect time to recognize what hasn't been working in our lives, repent for our parts in maintaining these unhealthy and unhelpful routines, and actively choose to break free from them while we welcome Christ into the conversation.

In today's third reading, we heard about the work of John the Baptist, how he inspired people from everywhere to come and hear about God and to anticipate the coming of another prophet—Jesus—who would be much more powerful and important than John. He told the people to repent "for the kingdom of God has come near." And the people came for this message, to learn what God wanted from them, and perhaps to feel more meaning in their lives.

Researching this topic, I thought again of those people I've seen online, flocking to inspiring stories or YouTube videos of survival or random acts of kindness and posting in the comments section about how great it made them feel. Many of them express thanks for the story or video, and they thank the kind individuals depicted in these stories for giving of themselves—sometimes even putting themselves in danger to save an animal or another human. Many share their own harrowing but inspiring tales of when someone was there for them. And, ultimately, there will be people who, as I previously acknowledged, take this opportunity to point out how these are rare examples of anything good in the world and how, nonetheless, they have received new faith in humanity.

I mean, it would be great if that really were the case—if by watching one video and reading through the comments of all the thankful people who watched it, they were now changed and could start looking at the world in a different way and seeing the people who help each other instead of hurt each other. And maybe they would also be inspired to go out and do good. For all I know, that's exactly what happens.

It occurred to me that maybe I've been cynical to assume, every time I hear that phrase of people having renewed faith in humanity, that it's always the same people again and again. Maybe it isn't. Maybe it's new people who are only now noticing something good.

Instead of feeling annoyed with the people who say this and thinking they should have better eyesight for seeing the complexities of the world, I could instead delight in the fact that they are gaining a better focus now. Maybe these moments *are* changing them. Maybe they're bringing them closer to God. Maybe these are their moments to repent how blind they have been or how destitute and cynical.

"John offers listeners a choice," says Ronald J. Allen at workingpreacher.org. "They can repent, and join the movement toward the Realm, or they can continue to collude with the old age and face eternal condemnation at the final judgment. ... When we do not cooperate with God's purposes, we invite the consequences upon ourselves."

This topic today reminded me of Ebenezer Scrooge's journey in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." By being visited by the spirits of his late business partner, Jacob Marley, and the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future, he becomes a changed man. But you can start to see that change about halfway through the story when Scrooge is seeing how cheerful and giving people are at Christmas time.

"Perhaps I never understood about Christmas," he tells the Ghost of Christmas Present when asked if he's ever noticed how wonderful things are at Christmas.

Like those people who have lost all faith in humanity, he can't see the good that's right in front of his eyes until it's pointed out to him—and then he can't not see it.

Suddenly, he's inspired by the celebrations, and he wants to see his family—his nephew, who, only hours earlier, he had no interest in seeing. It was the actions of others that inspired him to want to see more good being done—more joy and togetherness.

This Advent, let us actually see the good. Let us look for those moments of inspiration that others so carelessly ignore or which might pale in importance when bad things happen. And let us also go out there and do the good that the Lord asks us to do.

Paraphrasing Gandhi, let us be the good we want to see in the world. Then maybe more people will also see it and want to pass it on.