

The Masterpiece Theater project is presenting a whole series of films based on Jane Austen novels. One I saw the other night was entitled: Miss Jane’s Regret. Of course Austen’s work is all about marriage: who can marry whom, who’s a worthy or unworthy prospect, all this in a culture in which success in life, especially for women, depends entirely on marrying “well,” that is to ensure financial security, a “place in society” granting dignity and social standing. What Austen does, at her best, is call that society to become what one theologian calls “A Community of Character,” rather than one based on the size of ones income and the nobility of ones name, one based on honesty, justice, and integrity.

In this film there is a very telling moment when the apparently autobiographical spinster named Jane is talking to her younger sister. Her sister is panicking about having lost an opportunity to make a match with a well-to-do young man. She fears she will never have another opportunity and now she is confronting the one who has inspired her to stick to her high standards, even though, ironically she herself is even older with even fewer prospects for marriage. As this young woman speaks heatedly almost accusingly to her older sister, she says, “It wasn’t until I saw him through your eyes, that I realized I could not bring myself to marry him.”

Through whose eyes are you seeing your world, your life, your prospects for success and happiness? This is the question that I want to ask you today as we consider these familiar readings for the First Sunday in Lent.

For me the issue is not whether or not you see through the eyes of another. That is a given. From the time we are infants we form our identity and get our sense of values and priorities not from what others say to us, or try to teach us, but from what others do, what they look at, what captures the attention of those whom we are with.

Of course we are familiar with our tendency to rumor and gossip, and truisms like “bad company ruins good morals,” but I want to suggest is that our very identities are relational. We live in a relational matrix that fundamentally affects the way we think, talk, feel, and behave. I’m partial to a quote from the founding pastor of the Crystal Cathedral Robt H. Schuller, who said, “It’s not who I think I am that matters, its not who you think I am; but it’s who I think, you think I am that matters.” I will tend to live up or down to your image of me. I will be concerned with

what you are concerned with. I will tend to want to become you. Or better, we will tend to share a common desire, whether in agreement or disagreement.

This is at the heart of the story of the first couple in the garden. It's not until the serpent insinuates the notion that this tree in the center of the garden is special because God knows that when you eat of it you will be like God, that Adam and Eve even seem to notice it. Then they are obsessed with it. They have seen it from the serpent's perspective, and they have imbibed Satan's envy. And after they eat the only thing that seems to change is that they know they're naked. Our self-consciousness is a function of seeing ourselves from the point of view of another.

So from whose point view do we see ourselves? Who's regard do you seek? Who's life do you covet? look up to? admire? This is the issue that confronts Jesus after forty days and nights of fasting in the wilderness. When the tempter opens each question with "if you are . . .," he is subtly challenging Jesus to be the Son of God up to his standards. He is goading him. Questioning his identity. The temptation is "Who will Jesus imitate? Who's approval will he seek?" As a seminary teacher once put it, "what gets your attention gets you. What holds your attention is your God."

Who's eyes will we borrow? Last week was Groundhog day. I hope you remember the (1993) movie. In it a weatherman played by Bill Murray is assigned to cover (for this fourth year in a row) the emergence of the groundhog . . . He awakens the next day and finds that its Groundhog day again . . .and again and again. At first he tries to use this to his advantage by getting the female love interest, Rita, played by Andie MacDowell to like him. But she sees him as the self-centered jerk he really is. The more he tries to manipulate her into seeing him differently, the more he confirms her judgment of him.

So he gives up trying to be who he thinks she wants him to be. Instead of seeing himself through her eyes, he begins to see the world through her eyes. His egotism is overcome by seeing the world through the eyes of another. She is self-giving rather than self-centered; she is genuinely caring in ways that don't seek to manipulate or control. So he begins to find ways to help people throughout his endlessly repetitive string of groundhog days.

While trying to manipulate her he kept fulfilling her view of him. Now that he has become the town hero, Rita takes note, and her view of him is changed by seeing him through the eyes of the grateful and admiring townspeople of Punxsutawney, PA.

Lent is like our Groundhog Day, repetitive, the same stories every year. It is a chance for us to change our point of view. Instead of seeing ourselves through the eyes of rivals and friends as we so often do, those who seek to manipulate us or we seek to manipulate, Lent calls us to let go and experience ourselves as the object of God's perfect love in Christ Jesus. By hearing one another's stories we can see the world from the point of view of another beloved child of God. And imbibing that love our self-centered-ness can be healed and we can begin to live that love for others beyond our church community.

AMEN.