



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 23 – Proper 25

Year B

Let Me See

[RCL]: Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8, (19-22); Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52

The ancients used to call sight, “The Queen of the Senses.” I suspect this enthronement of the sense of sight is still understandable to us. After all, what is lovelier than seeing the orange fire of the sky at sunrise? What is more beautiful than the burning leaves of autumn? What touches our hearts more deeply than seeing a smile on our beloved’s face? You can imagine your own feast for the eyes: sights that delight or enchant, sights that you want to linger over and savor. There are so many sights around me that I want to remember, but, I suppose, the sights I want to remember most are the faces of those I love. I want always to remember the sight of my brother’s face as he held his newborn baby. I want always to remember the wonder in my niece’s eyes as she pointed to geese flying overhead. I want always to remember the smiling, laughing eyes of my grandfather at family gatherings. I can understand why the ancients called sight “The Queen of the Senses.”

I guess this is why the language of sight and seeing has come to mean so much more than simple sense perception. In our everyday talk, we use the language of seeing as a metaphor for understanding. When someone tries to explain something to us, they say, “I want you to see what I am trying to tell you.” And when we finally get it, we say, “Now I see it!” “It was right before my eyes all along.” “It was staring me right in the face.” In our religious speech, we also use the language of sight as a metaphor for faith. We talk about those things that are visible only to “the eyes of faith.” In the *Nunc Dimittis*, we sing, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people.” Classical theology spoke of our ultimate destiny as the “Beatific Vision”: a time when we shall behold God face to face. Now we see through a glass darkly, but then we shall see face to face.

But sometimes learning to see can be hard work. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard describes studies done on people who recovered their sight after years of blindness. These people were enabled to see after doctors had discovered how to perform safe cataract operations. Dillard writes, “In general the newly sighted see the world as a dazzle of color-patches... [they] learn quickly to name the colors, but the rest of seeing is tormentingly difficult.” These people have no idea of space or distance and so they walk around bumping into the sharp edges of the color patches and only then realize that they are part of something substantial. Some people find their new sense of sight so difficult and frustrating that they refuse to use their new vision, and lapse into their old ways of perceiving things. A doctor reported of one twenty-one year old woman who had regained her sight: “Her unfortunate father, who had hoped for so much from this operation, wrote that his daughter carefully shuts her eyes whenever she wishes to go about the house, especially when she comes to a

staircase, and she is never happier or more at ease than when, by closing her eyelids, she relapses into her former state of total blindness.” Another patient, so upset by the difficulty he has in learning to translate what he sees into something he can understand, says that he can’t stand it anymore and that he wants to tear his eyes out. Dillard also notes that for some, regaining a sense of sight is accompanied by a sense of shame. She writes, “A blind man who learns to see is ashamed of his old habits. He dresses up, grooms himself, and tries to make a good impression.”

Sometimes, learning to see can be tormentingly difficult. This seems to be true not only of physical sight, but also of learning to see the truth in the world around us, and, indeed, of learning to see the truth about ourselves. The pain and sorrow of this world so often make us want to avert our eyes from the truth. Turn on the nightly news and see the latest reports of violence in our communities, and we may feel like closing our eyes and relapsing into total blindness. Look with the prophet Isaiah at the massive injustices in our world, the grinding poverty, the degradation of human dignity, the prejudice, and we may feel like tearing our eyes out. Look at ourselves in the mirror and see the hurts and the wounds we have inflicted on others and on ourselves, and we may feel ashamed. Learning to see can be tormentingly difficult.

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, we have the story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus. When we look at Bartimaeus, we see that he was not only blind, but also that he was a beggar sitting beside the road. The truth about Bartimaeus is that because of his blindness, he had lost his freedom. Because of his blindness, Bartimaeus had become dependent on strangers. In particular, Bartimaeus had become dependent on folks who would travel the busy road between the major cities Jericho and Jerusalem. We see a blind beggar who had to rely on the handouts of passers-by, whose best bet was to position himself along the pathway of people who might toss him a coin or two.

When Jesus and his disciples walked by, Bartimaeus must have heard them, because he cries out for mercy. And what response do you think this blind beggar gets to his request for mercy? Mark tells us that “Many sternly ordered him to be quiet.” That’s a polite way of saying they told him to shut up. This poor man, this blind man, this man who is reduced to begging for his subsistence from passersby, cries out for mercy, and many people in the crowd tell him to shut his mouth.

But thanks be to God, Bartimaeus does not keep quiet. He cries out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And despite the attempts of the crowd to shut him up, Jesus hears him, hears his cry for mercy, and calls him to come near. When Bartimaeus learns that his request has been heard, he springs to his feet and runs to Jesus. And what does Jesus do first? He asks him a question: “What do you want me to do for you?” There is such an outpouring of compassion and love in this simple question. This blind beggar who was treated by so many people like a piece of trash along the side of the road, who was told to keep quiet, is now brought to Jesus who treats him like a human being. Notice, Jesus does not presume to know what Bartimaeus wants. Rather, Jesus raises this man up onto his own two feet, he takes him from a position of subservience and raises him up as human being, and asks him genuinely, lovingly, compassionately: What do *you* want?

And Bartimaeus says to Jesus, “My teacher, let me see again.” The depths of longing in that request are almost too much to bear. My teacher, let me see again, and let me no longer have to beg by the side of the road. My

teacher, let me see again, and let me no longer be dependent on strangers. Let me see again, and let me no longer be looked at with pity and scorn by passersby. My teacher, let me see again, and let me go free.

And Jesus says, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately, Bartimaeus regains his sight. He leaves his begging cloak behind. And he follows Jesus on the way.

Learning to see can be tormentingly difficult. But if we are willing to undergo the painful process, learning to see can also transform our lives. Learning to see can lift us up onto our own two feet. Learning to see can free us to love and serve our neighbors. Learning to see can free us to love and follow the Lord.

Annie Dillard also writes about the amazing gifts of learning to see again. She writes of a little girl who visits a garden. “She is greatly astonished, and can scarcely be persuaded to answer. She stands speechless in front of a tree, which she only names on taking hold of it, and then as ‘the tree with the lights in it.’” Another woman was so dazzled by the world’s brightness that she kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When at the end of that time she opened her eyes again, she did not recognize any objects, but the more she now directed her gaze upon everything about her, the more it could be seen how an expression of gratification and astonishment overspread her features; she repeatedly explained: “Oh God! How beautiful!”

Oh God! How beautiful! Learning to see can be a painfully difficult process. There is so much about our world and about ourselves that may make us want to look away. In so many ways, we are all imprisoned by our own types of blindness. But the good news is that we do not have to remain in bondage to our blindness. We can learn to see. We can learn to look at our neighbors with compassion. We can learn to unmask the self-serving rhetoric of peoples and companies and governments that tell people to keep quiet while they are subjected to grinding poverty and violence. We can learn to look at our own frailties and failings and ask for help. We can ask people what they need and help them get onto their own feet again. And we can learn to look anew at this amazing, awesome, blooming, buzzing, glorious creation and all the creatures in it, including our own blind and beggarly human race and exclaim, “Oh God! How beautiful! Oh God! How beautiful!”

Let us pray. O Lord our God, hear our cries for mercy. Raise us up from our places alongside the way of life. Heal us from our blindness. Set us free to look with compassion upon those whom you place in our paths. Free us to follow you on the way of self-giving love. And at the last day, bring us with all your saints into that heavenly city where all tears will be wiped away and where we shall behold you face to face. Amen.

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