

WHAT YOU CAN'T UN-SEE

Mark 10.46-52

October 28, 2018

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Gathering

You may recognize the tune Margie just played as “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” It is Martin Luther’s adaptation of Psalm 46:

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble ...*

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change ...

*The God of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

I have to think of our sisters and brothers in Pittsburgh this morning at the Tree of Life Synagogue. You probably have seen the story about the deaths there yesterday morning. They are likely to know the words of Psalm 46 and, no doubt, the earth has changed for them. And I pray for them some refuge and strength in this time of trouble and for all of us, release from the captivity of guns.

Psalm 46 is also famous for that line: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

In a situation like this we sometimes rush to words. And so, given the tragedy and the wisdom of this psalm, I want to ask for us to take a moment to not say anything. To be silent together. To honor the lives that have been lost. To entrust ourselves to a refuge beyond our words ...

And now:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

There are other reasons people might be hearing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” this morning. This is “Reformation Sunday,” and as you probably know, this hymn is identified with Martin Luther’s protest against the abuses of the Church of his day.

I suspect our Anabaptist ancestors – who were, by the way, persecuted by the reformers of their day - would say that the church is always in need of reforming because God, and the world, and we ourselves are always more than our eyes can see at any given moment. One of those reforming church leaders, Walter Chalmers Smith, wrote in the late 1800s:

*Immortal, Invisible, God only wise
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.*

This isn’t about God playing a cosmic game of hide-and-seek. It’s about the faith that does not take this world for granted because we know that reality is always more than meets the eye.

If “seeing is believing,” it is because believing is a way of seeing and a way of holding that which is un-seen.

So we stand this morning to embrace a life, a world, a way of seeing bigger than our own. “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,” hymn #1. Please stand as you are able and sing.

Intro to the Lesson

Father Mike Raschko over at Seattle University says that one of the major concerns in the Gospel of Mark is about seeing. In fact, right at the center of Mark, Mark 8.18, Jesus says to his followers: “Do you have eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear?” You have an eye problem, Jesus says.

And here in chapter 10, Jesus says there is something wrong with the way you see children if you try to keep them from coming to be blessed.

A couple weeks ago, Dr. Hunter spoke about the story of Jesus talking to a person with a lot of resources and he says that there is a problem with the way you see the relationship between what you have and who you are.

Last Sunday, Pastor Anita reminded us of the story that comes next where James and John come to ask about having a place of honor. And Jesus says: You have a problem with the way you see power.

So this series of stories ends with – guess what – a story about healing a person who is blind and giving him “the gift of sight.”

Lesson: Mark 10.46-52

They came to Jericho. As Jesus was leaving Jericho with the disciples and a large crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus ben-Timaeus was sitting at the side of the road. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth going by, he began to shout and to say, “Heir of David, have pity on me!” Many people scolded him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the louder, “Heir of David, have pity on me!” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him here.” So they called the blind man. “Don’t be afraid,” they said. “Get up; Jesus is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, Bartimaeus jumped up and went to Jesus. Then Jesus said, “What do you want me to do for you?” “My Rabbi,” the blind man said, “I want to see.” Jesus replied, “Go, your faith has saved you.” And

immediately Bartimaeus received the gift of sight and began to follow Jesus along the way.

Sermon: *What you can't un-see*

In the story this morning, the man who is blind, Bartimaeus, runs up to Jesus and Jesus asks: "What do you want?"

Last week Pastor Anita reminded us to pay attention to the questions. James and John come to Jesus with a request and Jesus says: "What do you want?" In other words, think about what you are asking.

This week a man who is blind comes to Jesus and Jesus says: "What do you want?"

Isn't it obvious? He's blind. Of course, Bartimaeus wants to see.

But Jesus asks: "What do you want?"

Perhaps Jesus doesn't want to presume. Perhaps he is asking Bartimaeus to be clear about what it is he really wants because sometimes the things other people want for us are not the things we want for ourselves. Or maybe we get the things we thought we wanted only to discover that they aren't the things we wanted after all.

Maybe Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants because he knows that once you see, there are things you cannot un-see.

In the nine years I have been here, this is the fourth time I have to talk about this story. And every time – every time Jesus asks the question and every time we sing "open my eye that I might see" – I hear the words of Carole Etzler, that feminist writer in the 1970s.

Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened.

Just for an hour how sweet it would be

Not to be struggling, not to be striving,

[to] just sleep securely in our slavery.

Maybe Jesus just wanted Bartimaeus to be sure that he wanted the gift of sight because once you see, there are things you cannot un-see.

Are there things you wish you could un-see?

I wish I could un-see Lady Gaga wearing that dress made of meat.

I wish I could un-see that demon-possession scene in the *Exorcist*.

I wish I could un-see those ASPCA ads of animals who have been abused and neglected.

I wish I could un-see the image of that naked little girl running from the bombing in Vietnam. That was all the way back in 1972 and I can still see it.

I wish I could un-see that fence outside of Laramie, Wyoming where Matthew Shepard was strung up, unconscious and left alone in the dark to die. You see that this week his remains were laid to rest in the National Cathedral in Washington. He is there because the family was afraid that burying him anywhere else would mean that his grave would be vulnerable to ongoing desecration.

Bartimaeus, are you sure you want to see? Because once you see, there are things you can't un-see.

"I want to see," Bartimaeus says.

And what has always intrigued me about this story is the irony that what he wants is *to see* and the last thing people in the story want is for Bartimaeus to *be seen*.

He yells and the people tell him to shut up. And he keeps yelling. And he yells louder and louder until Jesus finally calls for him.

And then, the story says, Bartimaeus “throwing off his cloak” jumped up and went to Jesus.

If he hadn't already made a spectacle of himself, running half naked through the crowd must have been a shock. And I can imagine people saying, “boy, I didn't need to see that; I can't un-see that!”

And that's the point, I think. By refusing to be invisible – to no longer be un-seen – Bartimaeus not only received the gift of sight but so did all the people who saw him. What they saw, could not be un-seen.

Back in 2009 when I talked about this story, someone left me a poem that ends:

*Those who step out into the light
Who say “this is me, warts and all” and these people are
My family and
They are your family too.
They have the gift of sight.
Open your eyes and see.
Open your heart, your tender heart
Love what you see – the person inside, warts and all.
Give yourself over to your heart of hearts
Take notice
Take heart
See what you don't want to see*

To this day, I don't know who left me this poem but it could be a gift from Bartimaeus himself.

Sometimes it's the very things you can't un-see that can change your life.

As I have been hearing about the attempts by this government to use gender definitions as a way to try to erase the existence of transgender people, I realized that I cannot hear that news and un-see the faces of my transgender friends. The government might want to make them invisible but I cannot un-see the faces of Randy and Allyson and Marsha and Kimmie and Katie-Lynn.

Sometimes what you cannot un-see can change your life.

Rebecca Ann Parker writes about the trials of those who worked in the death camps of Nazi Europe and she observes that:

It was as if these human beings had lost the ability to connect their actions to consequences. To think [she says] is to be able to see the relationships among things: the relationships of cause and effect, between one human being and another, between human beings and the earth. The prophet is one who thinks, and therefore, sees clearly the relationships among things.

See, it's not just the disturbing things, the mind-searing images we don't want to see that can change our lives. It is the connections and the relationships we cannot un-see that change our lives.

In advance of this Stewardship Series, I have been reading Diana Butler Bass' book on gratitude. As I was reading along, I came across these words that brought me up short:

... if we focus, we can see gratitude more clearly, how it guides us to a way of healing and compassion. With this new vision, we begin to see how it shapes our lives. Once we see, we cannot un-see.

That is, by seeing the relationship of things; seeing the connection between all things; seeing that all of life is a gift; we cannot un-see what is at stake for how we live our lives.

We cannot un-see that starry night sky that makes us feel like a tiny piece of a whole grand universe.

We cannot un-see that smile that saved the day.

We cannot un-see those images of courage and service and hope.

Kenneth Roth says that:

... one of the great privileges of working at Human Rights Watch is seeing what a small group of people, combining their voices, talents, and financial generosity, can do to address even seemingly intractable problems.

There is a lot we cannot un-see that has the power to change the world.

In the *Grateful* book, Diana Butler Bass tells the story of her grandmother:

[She] left school early to help feed her family during the Depression, got pregnant as an unwed teenager, and struggled with a son who was both mentally ill and a criminal sexual predator. She was tough and worked hard. When she was a girl, she had dreams of becoming a teacher, but she was poor and her local public school did not go past eighth grade. In exchange for education, some Catholic sisters asked her to scrub floors at the local convent that ran a high school. She took up the offer. It was a quid pro quo arrangement – they would teach her, and in payment she would clean for them. But when she wound up pregnant, the sisters sent her packing. She never became a teacher, and she never trusted promises like that again.

One of the ways we talk about gratitude, Bass says, is this quid pro quo: I do something for you and, in gratitude, you do something for me. Gratitude is not about gifts. It's about obligation – what we owe someone who has done something for us.

Bass' grandmother went on to have a successful life but she became fiercely independent. She loved Christmas and giving gifts but "she hated getting them." She would always say: "Don't give me anything; I don't want or need anything" – the words of "a scrappy working-class

fighter – a woman who had known poverty – and charity – and never wanted to be indebted to anyone again.”

When she neared sixty ... she developed heart problems, stopped working, and found herself dependent on my mother. This did not suit her ... and things got very hard ... she started reading the Bible, began talking about Jesus, and joined a small Baptist church with a quirky and kind preacher who believed in the power of salvation. It made a difference. It changed her ...

She lived a few more years, not easy ones. In the long process of dying, she had realized that life was a gift and that even her hard-won victories came, in part, through the love and goodness of others ... She had a great capacity to laugh, to see deeply, and to embrace the poor, strangers, the “little guy,” and outcasts. The tiny Baptist church reminded her of God’s love and the gifts that surrounded her. There she learned a deep spiritual truth: none of us is truly independent. We need each other, the earth ... God. And the thread of that interdependence is grace.

I love this. Grace is seeing our lives as this relationship that says “these people are my family and they are your family too.” Grace is stepping out into the light and saying, “this is me, warts and all.” Grace is what helps us to see what we may not want to see - what we may be afraid to see – that none of us are independent of each other. All of life is a gift.

Bass says that, “on occasion, I would go to church with [my grandmother] ... she really loved the hymns – especially ‘Amazing Grace,’ a hymn she had never sung until she joined that little church.”

I have to wonder what old John Newton would think of that. I can imagine that his life as a slave-trader meant that there were horrible things he could not un-see: living human beings thrown overboard to lighten the load; the cruelty to just keep people in line; the smell of untreated sickness; and the sounds of agony. There were things that John Newton could not un-see.

In the end, what saved him was the willingness to see the wretchedness of his own life and the truth that we are all connected in that great “thread of interdependence” that is amazing grace.

“I once was lost but now am found,” he writes, “was blind but now I see.”

Bartimaeus, are you sure you want to see? Once you see, there are things you cannot un-see.

“Yes,” he says, “I want to see.”

Open your eyes and see.

Open your heart, your tender heart

Love what you see – the person inside, warts and all.

Give yourself over to your heart of hearts

Take notice

Take heart

See what you don't want to see

Maybe you'll see more in the person in front of you and in your Spirit than you dreamed or dared to dream was possible.

Pay attention to all you can't un-see.

And today, if you hear God's voice – that sound of amazing grace – take heart, do not harden your hearts . . . and see more than you dared to dream was possible.

NOTES

Michael B. Raschko, *A Companion to the Gospel of Mark* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2003), pp.98-112. .
“Sometimes I Wish” by Carole A. Etzler is from the album by the same name available from Sisters Unlimited, P.O. Box 15307, Atlanta, GA. Rebecca Ann Parker, *Blessing the World* (Skinner House Books, 2006), p.126. Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (HarperOne, 2018), p.xxiv and 16-19.