

“I see trees walking”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison 9/30/18

Sometimes more isn't necessarily better. My dad's dad, whom I affectionately called Pawpaw, was a Pentecostal preacher, and one some summer during my teen years, he excitedly showed me his latest discovery—a new version of the Bible. It was called the Amplified Bible. This version was like pure gold for him because it took a normal verse of the Bible and now gave it colorful, additional words to choose from in order to add new life to old passages—in effect, expanding it with a thesaurus of additional words—and it certainly made Pawpaw sound smarter when he preached. To explain how this new version worked, he handed me a normal version and asked me to pick any verse—so I did. I read to him Job 13:5. *“If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom.”* He studiously found the same passage, without really listening to what I had just read, and began to read aloud to us both: *“Oh, that you would altogether hold your peace, silence your tongue, shut up! Then you would evidence, show, display your wisdom and you might pass for wise men, sages, intellectuals.”* It took him a moment to realize the joke. But we both laughed and agreed that more is not *always* better.

In this passage in Mark 8, where Jesus heals the blind man in Bethsaida, I am particularly moved by how the story starts. In verse 22, it says, *“They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him.”* How often to do we beg God for someone else's sake, or we beg anyone for someone else's sake? But you have here in the first Century of the Common Era—people advocating for the social welfare of another human being. You have *real* advocacy. And this isn't the first time you see this. You see this throughout Jesus' ministry, people bringing people to be touched by Jesus—to be cured of their sicknesses. People standing up on behalf of the most vulnerable, the most in need. People standing in the gap between the resources and the alienated. It is difficult not to see this level of advocacy for one's fellow human beings as something special, a level of care often missing in our modern era. This is a sermon in and of itself, but a partial digression from where I'm headed this morning.

Today, I want to focus on the act of healing: How Jesus approaches this blind man's state and how he proceeds to cure him. As most anyone can imagine, blindness often holds within it a powerful metaphor, which I feel if not applied in this case will become a missed opportunity for deeper knowledge and understanding. As the old song tells us, *“For I was blind but now I see,”* and we find ourselves wanting to see more. Though we may have physical sight in this life, there is surely a spiritual blindness with which we find ourselves wrestling daily—if not hourly. In fact, we gather in this time of contemplation, worship, and fellowship because we seek to see more clearly. We journey together purposefully because we desire to see more, to understand more. Similar to the blind man in this story, we too want our sight restored (our spiritual sight). And maybe like the villagers in the story, here within our own faith community, we can advocate for one another to grow spiritually, to move along in our individual journeys of faith—to stand in the gap for one another's internal spiritual welfare, seeking to see each of us at our best. This sets the standards with which we judge the efficacy of our own inward journeys, our own baseline for forward growth as part of Church of the Covenant.

Jesus' response to the villagers request was to take the blind man by the hand. Jesus became personally, compassionately involved. I cannot think these were simple facts that can be drawn into a larger

metaphor. Jesus took the man by his hand and led him to a more private setting, outside the village, away from others—a place of solitude. Here Jesus became even more intimate with the man. He applied his saliva to his eyes. Jesus took his own DNA, his own physical essence, and put it squarely on the man's eyeballs—which for us is a crude act, holding no significance, seemingly steeped in some backward (3rd world) healing technique. But we know that this was intimacy. Jesus' DNA mixing with the blind man's DNA. I think spiritually speaking, most of us desire to know God on such a level, to be infused by God's essence. And this man, must have felt it in his physical. Jesus asks him, "Do you see anything?" And I ask you the same thing, "*Do you see anything?*" What do your spiritual eyes show you? The man responded to Jesus in the physical, "*I see people; they look like trees walking around.*" I absolutely love this response. For me, it's life altering. And I will explain why.

Let me start with a real-life example. As you know we live in the parsonage, just here on Boonsboro Rd, and our bedroom is on the street side of the house. In the middle of the night, I heard a loud boom and then a screeching scraping sound—along with some sort of constant horn sound. It was mind boggling the intensity of it all, and it was unsettling loud. My heart was racing. Being roused out of my sleep and then suddenly propelled to reality, my lucidity was questionable—but I made immediate conclusions of the sounds I was hearing, without seeing a thing—all based on my experience. Limited by my own knowledge I cobbled together a mental picture of what was happening outside. Matching the sounds to things I've heard in my past and calculating probability, I assumed someone had crashed their car into something, hence the first loud BOOM I heard; next I imagined the bumper or other pieces of the car had dislodged and were dragging on the ground, hence the high pitched scraping sound I heard; finally, I imagined the horn mechanism had been manipulated in the crash and was now permanently activated. I made all of these conclusions, sight unseen, within seconds, based on the limited knowledge I had learned in my lifetime of experiences. I then raced to the window to confirm my assessment, and I saw nothing. The sounds were gone. To be honest, I don't know if what I thought I heard, I actually heard. Was it a dream? Was it something else entirely? Was it simply a snow plow trying out its blade ahead of later season snow storms? Who knows? I guess I must admit I simply saw what looked like trees walking around. And the blind man in this Bible story was honest with Jesus. He didn't lie. He told him the truth, like a patient working honestly with their doctor, telling them where it hurts—not afraid of disappointing them or hurting their feelings because their remedy had been ineffective.

To admit that I see what looks like trees walking around, is me admitting that I don't have all the answers. This was the premise of post-structuralism, coming on the heels of the structuralism of the early and mid-19th Century thought. The idea that the world is simply a composite of set structures. However, post-structuralists, later called post-modernists, saw the world from a far more fluid perspective, questioning the institutions and structures themselves. This is especially the product of my generation and those that have followed, generations bent on critical review, cynical interpretation, and comfort in uncertainty; we gave place to programs like "The Simpsons" and "Family Guy," often using humor to expose the "insanity" of our systems of control, and propose a much more elusive fluidity to reality, that X is not necessarily X (it could be Y, after all). This appreciation for poking holes in already established belief systems, exposing the paradoxes and hypocrisies of our "structures" and not being personally affected by such shaky structure-less-ness was our hallmark—our post-modernism. As a philosophical conviction, we must not say that we see "people," instead we are comfortable with saying we "see what look like trees moving." Truth is less apparent, and now is personal, and subject to change. This, for me, was revolutionary—and always an internal conflict as I struggled out of dogma and

structure to embrace a newer me, one that accepts my own Gen-X tendencies, and finds solace in Jesus' act of healing—bringing the blind man gradually out of a state of utter blindness, now to a place of some clarity, but not full clarity.

While Jesus continues, by once again touching the man's eyes and giving him full sight, I am left still contemplating the significance of the in between—the place where we may not know for certain all that we are seeing but we are comfortable with that. We are comfortable describing a car accident that may, or may not, have happened. We are comfortable with explaining our own experience, with plenty of room for yours, which may be the opposite of my own—and equally valid. There is an openness to seeing more that this blind man seems to have and yet a contentment with not seeing it all just yet. The blind man, as you can note in this story, does not complain when he sees trees moving. Jesus, though, gives him additional clarity. I think this is the metaphor for us. We seek more clarity in our spiritual sight. We concede that what we see isn't necessarily what is really happening. There is something more. As the Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 6:12, "We wrestle not with flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." There is more than meets the eye. There is the root of the actions we see played out around us. When two people make rude remarks to one another, there is more there. There may be years of abuse that precipitated that single, terse exchange we may witness. The less-than-kind behavior we display to one another will certainly have a birthplace that goes much deeper, much further back, often hidden from our consciousness—trauma, socialized prejudice, or even abuse. Things that we may not even acknowledge now, but have their genesis in our earliest experiences in life. So, it would be difficult not to say "I see trees walking around," with the understanding that there is more mystery yet to be revealed, more truth to uncover and explore. Welcome to the journey, the journey of self-discovery, the journey of spiritual growth: The journey of a lifetime.

In light of this, as Mike Buhler so eloquently shared from his own story, we invite you to continue to journey with us. Please consider joining us this next Saturday for our Annual retreat, which is a time of personal prayer, contemplation, study, and sharing. We will begin at 8:30 for a light breakfast, then worship together at 9. We have a silent lunch together, and then close the day with sharing—and anticipate wrapping up by 4pm with commitments/recommitments for those who wish, with the Covenant—either as Covenant or Community members. All are invited. This may not appeal to you at the moment, and that is fine as well. Our joint journey is still rich in love and encouragement. We are all still members together of this community of faith either way, spurring each other on to inward and outward expressions of spiritual action—and a collective recognition that we don't understand it all, and that we live within this mystery together. Perhaps we all realize that what it is we see, we are only beginning to understand—for I must confess that "I still see trees walking."

Peace to you all!