10-11-2020 “Multiply Through Me”

I first knew I needed glasses when I was in first grade. I remember our teacher projecting film strips (if you’re old enough to remember those) and if she called on me to read or describe what was on the screen I would have to borrow glasses from my friend Craig Bennett so that I could read. My mom took me to the Optometrist, Dr. Wilburding, but the tests they used for little kids back then were so simple that even with my nearsightedness I still passed. It wasn’t until I was in fifth grade that I finally failed a vision exam and was prescribed glasses. I switched to contact lens in high school and wore those until sometime in the early 90s, when, after injuring my right eye on a youth group trip I was leading, I went back to wearing glasses and have worn them ever since. For a long time my prescription changed pretty significantly every year or two but as I’ve gotten older the changes from one exam to the next are usually only slight. But even with prescription lenses I still struggle to differentiate between the colors green and gray at times, as well as with distance perception when, for example, I’m playing golf. External vision correction can only go so far I guess.

A little over a year ago Lynn and I were in Sedona, AZ on vacation and we went to a star gazing event hosted at the resort where we were staying. A local amateur astronomer brought a collection of binoculars and telescopes for the group to look through and he provided us a visual tour of the night sky. We began by looking through a powerful set of binoculars, mounted on a tripod in order to minimize vibrations, and he showed us how much is visible that way. Then we worked our way up through increasingly larger and more powerful telescopes until finally each of us had a chance to sit atop a step ladder and look through the eyepiece of 12’ long telescope with an 18” mirror, through which you could see star clusters, distant galaxies, binary stars and all sorts of intergalactic sights. In fact, I think it would have been powerful enough to read the license plate on one of the those Apollo mission moon buggies if he had aimed it in that direction.

After we returned home, having gone on and one and on about how much I would LOVE to have a nice telescope because I’ve always loved astronomy and all things outer space, and that I wanted to be able to share that experience with our grandkids, Lynn conceded that maybe that could be a birthday/Christmas present. I started doing research for what would be a good but moderately priced telescope and I sent the information to Lynn. After that, I honestly forgot about it. When my birthday arrived in December I came home to find a large box awaiting me in the living room. When I opened it and realized what it was I was so excited I’m not ashamed to tell you that I cried. Since then, I go out to look at the moon, stars and planets often, and welcome opportunities to show anyone who wants to see. While you can certainly find beautiful, high definition photographs online of Jupiter or Saturn from the Hubble telescope that are much larger, clearer, and more detailed than what I can see through my telescope, it’s one thing to look at a photo of Saturn’s rings or Jupiter’s moons, but quite another to see it in real time with my own two eyes. Seeing truly is believing.

Rev. Sarah Wanck, a United Methodist Elder in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference, wrote a wonderful article about “seeing” in reference to our scripture passage today from John 5. In the passage a man who is only described as “sick” has been coming to the pool at Bethsaida for 38 years in hope of being healed in the waters there, but that has never happened. In some translations of this story, included is a later editorial addition that clarifies that the belief at the time was that an angel would stir the waters of this pool and that if a person could be the first person into the waters after it was stirred, then that person would be healed. This man has never managed to get into the water in a timely manner and so has born his burden for nearly four decades. In considering this passage, Rev. Wanck shares about a trip to Israel that she made in which she went to Bethsaida and visited these very same pools. And she writes, “As I stood in the old city that day, I marveled at Jesus’ compassionate action to heal the man. But it took my breath away when I realized that Christ’s most significant miracle here was simply to see.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

To put her realization into some context, she began her article talking about how her mother had struggled when Sarah was a child to raise her family and run her household after dealing with the effects of polio. Her mother wore large metal braces on her legs and walked with the use of crutches under both arms, and her daughter recalled how her mother would struggle to carry grocery bags in her hands as she held tightly to the handles on the crutches, three young children in tow, as she labored to make her way through the grocery store, to open doors, and to do all the things that most people take for granted. Making the struggle all the more difficult was the able-bodied people who just pushed past her as though she wasn’t there. Sarah then shared about how her own young son, pretty small for his age, said quietly from the back seat of the car one day when she had picked him up after school, that because he was so small, people just talked over the top of him, not realizing that he was there. “People don’t see me, Mom,” he lamented in what she describes as his sweet little voice. “He saw that they didn’t see him. Those small moments of invisibility to others caused this precious boy to question his place, his worth in the world.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

It is these two events in her life that came to mind as she, contemplating the miracle at the pool of Bethsaida, suggested that “Christ’s most significant miracle was simply to see.” And she goes on to explain: “The text says, “When Jesus saw him…” (v.6). Jesus was most known for the miracle of healing, but Jesus’ most vital ministry may have been the ministry of sight. Jesus saw the value and worth of those others overlooked. He saw the orphan, the slave, the sinner, the women, the outcast, the unclean. He **saw** them. And in seeing them, he was able to offer compassion in their pain ever before he stepped in to heal what was broken.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

Whether or not we wear eyeglasses of one kind or another, we all have vision problems; we all have blind spots to overcome. The question isn’t whether we have them, the question is whether we’re aware of them. In our passage from Philippians, in the verses we didn’t read leading up to the three we did, the Apostle Paul provides a description of his former self as the ultimate Jew, the perfect Pharisee, with outstanding lineage and education and morality according to the Law. And after describing how he had striven to be the very best in all things that he had done up to that point he then goes on to say that he considers all of that “dung.” Actually, the Greek “skybalon,” in many versions is translated as “rubbish” or “garbage,” but in reality it translates most directly to “feces.” Paul is saying it’s all “crap.” As Christian Eberhart comments on this part of the Epistle, “Paul now rejects ‘righteousness of my own that comes from the law;” he hopes for one ‘that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith’ (verse 9). His new goal is the knowledge of Christ (verses 8, 10); knowing the power of his resurrection’ would help him achieve his own resurrection” (10-11).[[4]](#footnote-5) That is, his own transformation through Christ.

Paul, you’ll remember, was a persecutor of Jesus and of those who followed him. He didn’t see who Jesus was, didn’t recognize him as the Messiah, the Savior sent from God. It was only when he was literally struck blind on the road to Damascus that he could see that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, and only after his own vision was restored to him that he was able to see that his own salvation lay not in what he had done as the ultimate Jew or the perfect Pharisee, but in his transformation into a devoted follower, a disciple of Jesus. He first had to see - to see Jesus and then see the error of his own ways, his own flawed thinking - before he was then able to be transformed. And so in our reading for today, Paul writes, “I’m not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don’t get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward - to Jesus” (Phil. 3:12-14, MSG).

Paul saw who he had been, who he was, how he was. He recognized his own blind spots - literally and figuratively - and because he did he was able to be transformed into a disciple of Jesus Christ. And through Paul, then, God multiplied the impact of the early church. And in the process, he was made new, because a life centered on Christ is a life of transformation. In the United Methodist Church we claim as our mission statement that we are to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” And God knows, the world needs some transformation right now. If we are serious about being disciples of Jesus Christ who change the world - if we’re not just here playing church - then we, too, must be changed. We must be transformed. We must have our eyes opened, our vision restored, that we might see first how **we** are, so that we might then see those in our world, in our society, in our community, that others do not see. Because that is how the world will be transformed - not from the top down by governments or institutions, by policies or programs - but from the bottom up, by individuals like you and me, who, perhaps for the first time in our faith lives, move past the idea that simply because we call ourselves “Christian” we think our “skybalon” doesn’t stink, and begin to truly see those people who have been or are being overlooked, those on the margins because of their race, their gender, their sexual orientation, or their socio-economic status. It’s only when we, like Christ at Bethsaida, actually see that whole segments of our society are not being treated with love and respect and compassion, and then act on it that we can begin to think of ourselves as being Christ-like. God wants to do a new thing in the world through us, through the church. How willing are we to allow God to do a new thing in our lives, in God’s church, and through us together in the world?

As Sarah Wanck writes, “Extending the ministry of sight to others, the way Jesus did, will require two things of us. First, to look in on ourselves, through examination and confession, to acknowledge our blindness. And secondly, to identify our limited vision as we open our eyes to the needs of others. In order to see, we have to identify our short-sightedness. Only then can we correct it.”[[5]](#footnote-6) And then, like a spiritual optometrist, she writes a prescription to help us correct our vision: the Daily Examen.

The Daily Examen was developed over 400 years ago by St. Ignatius as a prayer practice in which believers reflect on the day’s events and God’s presence in them. This daily examination, which was also practiced regularly by John Wesley, asks us to unearth our embedded motives, to look upon our sin, and to identify bias and ignorance in our selves, with the intent being that by recognizing our own spiritual immaturity, our failure and imperfection, we can begin to grow in our spiritual maturity. It is only when we recognize the ugliness, the distrust, the bias, the fear, the pride, the sin that is buried within us that we can truly repent - turn our lives in a new direction - and begin the process of personal transformation that will lead to the transformation of the world. It was those things that Paul came to recognize within himself. And rather than denying them, rather than blaming them on his upbringing, he embraced that that was who he had been in his past, but it was not who he would be going into the future.

Once we have seen the darkness that lies within us, once we have owned who and how we were before we became followers of Jesus, then we can begin to multiply the presence of God in the world by creating new places for new people. “With internal examination,” Wanck writes, “we’re then able to shift our attention to a new external vision in the compassionate consideration of others. Compassion is a gift from God. It’s the ability to see what God sees, to care for the experience of others as much as we care about ourselves. It is love for neighbor as we walk in another’s shoes and give value to their story… The world seems to have lost sight of compassion. People seem to spend more time defending their own position instead of seeing and validating another’s perspective. Compassion is necessary for seeing another person’s story while simultaneously recognizing that we will never fully understand it.”[[6]](#footnote-7)

But first it requires correcting our own vision so that, in looking in on someone else’s life, we might give value to their experience and recognize the obstacles in their way. It is when we follow the ancient traditions of the church, when we follow the way of Jesus, by clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, and caring for the sick that we begin to experience perspectives that widen our worldview, that expand our vision, to see the struggle that people experience every day, but that we are often blind to when cloistered in our segregated neighborhoods and affluent communities. We can only be God’s agents of transformation in the world when we open our eyes to the struggles that are all around us.

As we consider how God is calling us to create new place for new people, we must first consider how God wants to multiply God’s kin-dom in and through us. Sarah Wanck, in concluding her reflection on the passage from John wrote these beautiful words,

“What those people didn’t know as they blindly walked past my mother every day, was the strength she carried as she raised her children, owned a business, and earned a graduate degree - how she mustered more effort in a single task than most people needed in a day. They didn’t see the grace she extended as she forgave the hurt other people put on her with their ignorance. They missed witnessing the faith that fueled her to trust the Lord with every toilsome step. They missed the incredible beauty because they were too busy looking away. We will never know the strength, beauty, and grace represented by the people around us until we see them…

Until we, like Ignatius and John Wesley, examen our hearts for our sin against them…

Until we look in on their experiences with compassion…

Until we see the truth of their stories and struggle…

Until we recognize the value and potential right in front of our faces.

Healing begins with sight.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

So the challenge God places before us is simply this: Will you commit to having your vision corrected, to seeing others, to really seeing others, that they might see the love of Christ multiplied in and through you? Amen.

1. Wanck, Rev. Sarah, “The Ministry of Sight,” on [unsplash.com](http://unsplash.com)*,* August 24, 2020, Accessed September 3, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Eberhart, Christian, “Commentary on Philippians 3:4-14” on [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org), October 5, 2014, Accessed September 26, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Wanck, Sarah [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)