

July 26, 2020

Mark 8: 22-25

May we pray together? Dear God, Please go with us into the study of your word. Help us to see this world as you see it. Help us to see each other as you see us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

My One Sermon

Right after my memoir *The Weight of Mercy* was published in 2012, I began getting invitations to speak in other churches. People wanted to hear about Triune, about the work we do, about the people here.

So I crafted a sermon around one of my favorite Scriptures from the gospel of Mark. I preached that sermon in probably 30 churches in Greenville and Simpsonville, Glassy Mountain and Seneca, Columbia and Charleston. I preached it in Florida and Georgia, in North Carolina and upstate New York.

When I was invited to preach at Harvard, I thought, "OK, I need some new material. But I couldn't do it. When it came time to write, I

wanted the people in Cambridge to hear about Triune, about the people here and how we had forged a life together.

You know, they say a preacher basically has only one sermon. So for my last sermon, I want to share with you what I have been sharing with everyone else when I was away from you. Because it's about you, it should sound very familiar. You've lived it, and you've heard me talk about it.

It starts out with a silly story about a light-weight Ralph Lauren sweater I bought late one summer. It was white with navy blue trim around the neck and sleeves, and it had gold buttons on the shoulders.

It had that navy and white nautical look that designers re-tool every summer, no matter what. For the next few months, I wore that sweater with navy capris.

That November, my younger daughter, Madison, came home from college for a doctor's appointment. I went with her to his office, and I wore that sweater with navy slacks.

And as we were sitting there, chatting, before the doctor came in, Madison said, “Mom, why are you wearing navy pants with a black and white sweater?”

Now let me pause for a moment to say Madison was just one-half of the fashion police force in our family. She and her older sister, Dustin, ruled over my closet brutally for 20 years.

They told me my polka-dot pantsuit made me look like a clown.

They said my double-breasted navy and red suit made me look like an elevator operator. I was genuinely puzzled. “How do you know what an elevator operator looks like?”

Even Vince joined in. He took one look at my new wide-lapeled, pin-striped pants suit ... and asked if I were reviving the Dave Clark Five.

But that day in the doctor’s office, Dustin was out terrorizing someone else, and Madison was left to hold the line for *Vogue*. “Why are you wearing navy pants with a black and white sweater?”

Well, I wasn't falling for that. My reply was automatic: "Don't be silly! This sweater is navy and white."

She said, "No, it's not. Look in the mirror."

So I got up to prove her wrong, and looked in the mirror. And lo and behold, I was wearing navy pants -- with a black and white sweater.

I couldn't believe it. How could that be? For months, I'd been sailing around Greenville in navy pants and a black and white sweater, thinking I matched.

And suddenly, it was so obvious that sweater was black and white. How could I have ever seen it as navy?

Because that is what happened. My brain was so convinced it was navy because of the whole nautical theme ... that navy is what my eyes saw.

I tell this ridiculous but true story to start us thinking about today's Scripture passage, about things we think we see, about things we think

we know. About people we think we see, about people we think we know.

The gospel writer Mark wrote a good bit about people who truly saw Jesus and people who didn't. In the middle of his gospel, he placed three stories of Jesus foretelling his death and resurrection to the disciples. And three times, the disciples reacted with obtuseness. Or self-absorption. Or worse.

To make his point more vivid, Mark book-ended this whole middle section with stories of Jesus healing blind strangers. I think he was saying, *Look at these two people who had no pretensions of understanding Jesus. They really saw him, while the disciples who spent so much time with him were blind.*

Our Scripture passage today is the first bookend.

Reading from **Mark 8: 22-25.**

22 (Jesus and the disciples) came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to

touch him. ²³He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?'

²⁴And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.'²⁵Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

We once had a rock band from the Salvation Army recovery program play during a church service. The band's name was Men Like Trees, Walking. And one of the songs they performed was Johnny Nash's "I Can See Clearly Now."

I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,

I can see all obstacles in my way

Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind

It's gonna be a bright (bright), bright (bright)

Sun-Shiny day.

These men were in recovery, many of them from years and years of drug abuse and alcoholism. They could see some truth, but at times, things were fuzzy, like trees walking around.

But they knew a day would come when their blindness would be healed, when they could see clearly.

Before I went into ministry, as you know, I was a reporter for *The Greenville News*. I was the newsroom's barometer of "average." An editor would tell a writer that a reference was too hip or too esoteric or too colloquial, and the writer would say, "Well, let's ask Deb. If she gets it, anybody will get it."

I should have been insulted, but my daughters had pretty well inoculated me.

So when I arrived at Triune with no knowledge of a population who quite literally lives under bridges, in abandoned buildings, in the woods, I

thought, “If I didn’t know about these people, I bet a lot of others don’t either.”

So one of my first goals was to help Greenvillians *see* homelessness. To know what they were looking at when they saw people sitting up, asleep, at the library.

To know what they looking at when they saw adults on Main Street with backpacks.

To know what they were looking at when they saw cardboard under bridges or beside buildings, that it meant someone had slept there the night before.

Because we don’t have to be physically, optically impaired to miss what’s going on around us.

We began offering Back Yard Mission Days, meaning “there’s a mission field in your own back yard.” We took people from suburban churches around Greenville’s so-called “homeless triangle.” We

empowered a homeless person to be our guide, and the group got to know him or her and ask all the questions they wanted.

One day a group from a large suburban Methodist church stood under the Pete Hollis Corridor bridge, talking to a mentally ill man living in a tent, and looking up at evidence that another 5 to 10 people were living under the girders. One woman put her hands over her face, and said, “How did I not know this?”

We all need to *see* how some of our citizens live.

My second goal was to offer a way out of homelessness, primarily through freedom from addiction, then by accessing medical care, mental health care, legal aid, jobs and housing. We have sent more than 1,600 people into drug rehab, and quite a few into jobs and housing.

I was smart enough to see the need for that. I wasn't smart enough to see the deeper issue.

That came about when our first associate pastor and facilities manager, Alfred Johnson, began inviting people to help him. I'd come to

work and find volunteers sweeping, mopping, painting, packing groceries, serving tea, waiting tables, repairing the plumbing.

And I'd think, *What are they doing? Why aren't they trying to find paying jobs?*

Then an early worshiper, Elaine Nocks, gave me a book about a similar ministry out in San Francisco. Like us, that church had set up a food pantry.

After a few months, the people receiving groceries began showing up early to help give out the groceries. The woman managing the pantry was perplexed. But as I was reading her book, I thought, "Oh, I get that. They want to be part of your community. "

Oh, wait a minute. That was *exactly* what was happening at Triune, and I hadn't seen it. All those homeless volunteers wanted to be part of *our* community.

(touch eyes) *Oh, now I see.*

All those trees walking around, sweeping and mopping and packing groceries were actually people. I saw a community at worship.

What Triune could do as a welcoming church was far more than it could do as a social service agency. It could invite people to belong. It could let them know our community would be poorer without them.

One woman had suffered brain damage and lived on the street. She went by two different names, but at any given time, she would answer to only one. She snarled at people who sat too near her. She hit the drums every time she walked to the restroom.

One Sunday morning she knelt at the altar rail to receive communion. “The body of Christ broken for you, Denise,” I said, hoping that was the name of the day. “The blood of Christ shed for you.”

And she turned to the Furman professor kneeling next to her and beamed, “Pastor knows my name!”

(touch eyes) *Oh, now I see!*

This is how I see mission now. I see it as welcome, as camaraderie, as standing alongside, as trying as hard as we can to remember names.

Lois called from North Carolina in June. When we met Lois, she was living beside the dumpster outside the Greenville Convention Center.

She began working with us to get dentures, to set up classes at Greenville Tech, to obtain housing through Greenville Mental Health. She was so ambitious that we enrolled her in our first Triune Circles.

You've heard me share how her team visited on her birthday, carrying a cake, balloons and a pink dogwood tree to plant outside her new picture window. When she told me about it later, she said, "Pastor, those people had to know me so well, love me so well, to know that a pink dogwood was the best gift they could have ever given me."

But of course, the best gift wasn't the pink dogwood tree. The best gift was having four new friends who had her back.

(touch eyes) *Oh, now I see!*

This is how I see mission now. I see it as touching shoulders, making eye contact, as walking beside, as planting dogwood trees. This is how I see it now, but I may *still* be looking at trees, walking.

Coincidentally, Lee King called in June as well. Back when I started in 2005, he took the prize as our surliest congregant.

He spent every weekend sleeping in our dining hall. When spoken to, he grunted. When asked to take out trash, he rolled his eyes.

But one Sunday, I asked Lee to help me serve communion. To my surprise, he agreed.

Days before the next communion, he sought me out to grumpily ask if he had to help again. "Yes," I assured him. "Yes, you do."

From that moment, he turned into a different person. He started setting up tables and chairs in the dining hall, taking out trash. He started serving tea. Then he started *making* tea. He brewed the coffee. He brought coffee to my office.

Lee became the liaison with our churches when they served meals. For many of our meal partners, he was the face of Triune.

Lee finally entered a VA rehab program – *nine years* after we started talking about it. That's the kind of timeline that isn't going to track well on a spreadsheet. That's the kind of timeline only God wants to fund.

One of my proudest moments here came when I got a call from the director of a partner agency. She said her agency had assembled a focus group on what Greenville needed, what was working and what wasn't. And she said, "I just wanted you to know that Triune came out at the top of almost everyone's list."

She said when the questioners asked what was so good about Triune, people answered, "When we go there, they are glad to see us."

(touch eyes) *Oh, now I see!*

If Denise and Lois and Lee have changed my life, if Vernelle and Sippio and Morgan and Vincent and Pete and Russ and Lucy and

Douglas and Kenny have changed my life, so, too, have all of the other people who chose to worship alongside us. People who made a conscious decision to *see* brothers and sisters they could have ignored. To look at people hard enough, closely enough, that they were revealed as children of God.

When I would ask what brought such people here, their answer was consistent: “I think this is what the kingdom of God looks like.”

Unfortunately, we cannot live here in this butterfly sanctuary full time. We live in a world that seems to get uglier by the day.

And so we have to be open to having our sight as Christians, our perspective as Christians, refined, refocused, clarified. We must constantly blink to see if those trees walking are really people.

At the close of the middle section of Mark’s gospel, he writes about the healing of blind Bartimaeus. That’s the matching bookend.

But Bartimaeus was healed immediately. There was none of that blurry, men-like- trees-walking stuff. In fact, I can't think of a single other healing in which Jesus had to take two swings at it.

There's a reason Mark told his odd little story this way. There's a reason the blind man at Bethsaida saw first through a glass darkly, and then clearly. I think Mark was commenting on the way we see Jesus, the way we learn, the way we discern.

A little bit, as we step out on faith. A little bit, as we worship in this special place. Then a little more, and a little more.

If there is one thought I could leave behind, one thing I'd have people remember about the last 15 years at Triune, it is this: Let us question what we think we see, what we think we know. Especially for those of us who've spent entire lifetimes in church, *let us question what we think we see, what we think we know.*

Let us peer beneath the trauma, the damage, the hurt, the brokenness, and see the child of God huddled there.

And likewise, let us peer beneath the gloss, the pride, the sleekness, the arrogance, and see the child of God huddled there.

What was it Myra sang? “Our eyes were blind, we could not see. We didn’t know who you were.”

We can certainly go through our days blind to the needs of others, blind to the teachings of Jesus to feed, clothe, welcome, care for, visit.

We can refuse to see the broken, the poor, the homeless, the Denises, the Loises, the Lees. We can insist upon seeing navy because that’s the way we’ve always seen.

Or we can invite Jesus to touch our eyes. Again and again and again.

Amen.