

## “One Thing I Do Know”

A sermon by  
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On a recent trip to Michigan for the wedding of an old friend, we crossed the state line headed north on I-75, and I quickly recalled why I moved out of Michigan. Snow was everywhere! And it wasn't the refreshing, clean snow that blankets the world with quiet. This was February snow—slushy leftovers from some storm now clinging to dirty street corners and dripping from rooftops. We passed anemic snowmen and piles of snow plowed into exhaust covered clumps. The sun was tucked away behind a steel curtain of clouds with such finality that I thought it might never return.

When we got back into North Carolina, our chilly weather felt quite balmy by comparison. And so Myles and I ventured out for a walk through Riverside cemetery, where we often go to drink in fresh air, sunshine, and quiet. It was on this walk that I spotted the first green fingers of spring popping up from the earth. Maybe you too have seen them. I recognized the budded heads of daffodils waiting to unfurl their yellow proclamation of spring. The sun peeked through a gilded cloudscape and hushed the bitter wind. It felt like God was taking notice of me. In this winter-weary season of lamenting human brokenness and aching for signs that death gives way to new life, it felt like God was offering a simple sign of hope. Have you ever experienced being noticed by God? Have you ever set eyes on a sunset or fingered a flower that you suspected was thrust into your path as a sign of God's abundant grace?

Our text for this morning begins with a blind man being noticed by the holy one. And oh what joy and assurance must have pierced this man's heart when he was noticed by Jesus. The whole town knew this man, and I imagine they had grown tired of his outstretched hands and mumbling inquiries for hand outs. It happens. We grow so accustomed to the poor that they become invisible. Here was someone who sat on the same corner every day, begging. How is it that Jesus, who must have seen hundreds of poor beggars in the seasons of his travel, noticed this particular man? That's the thing I love about Jesus. He notices those struggling to survive on the margins. And his compassionate presence is the first sign of the healing balm he offers to those who hurt. He notices.

In our vision of becoming a public church in downtown Asheville, we too are beginning to notice those who used to be invisible. We've started seeking out the company of strangers. The public is the backdrop for much of Jesus' ministry. Theologian Parker Palmer names the significance of public life for spiritual growth. He says, “the stranger of public life becomes the spiritual guide of our private life. Through the stranger, our view of self, of world, of God is deepened...Through the stranger we are given the chance to find ourselves. And through the stranger, God finds us...in the midst of our estranged lives, a gift of God and of the public life.”<sup>1</sup>

A few weeks ago, some of us met with the founders of Zacchaeus House to better discern how we can offer hospitality to the stranger without being all things to all people. The women of Zacchaeus House wisely suggested that we choose to do something consistently and well, even if it is a small thing. And then they noticed some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, p. 70.

strangers in our neighborhood and mentioned the idea of a monthly luncheon for folks from the courthouse across the street. Not just for the many poor who cycle through our criminal justice system, but also for the lawyers, the judges, the advocates. A public meal down in our Friendship Hall, as a way to offer God's grace to folks who might be having a hard day. A public meal, to bring together those in adversarial positions. A public meal so that we might notice the strangers in our midst, just as Jesus noticed the blind man.

When I was in college I studied in London for a semester, and I met a man from Ghana who told me this parable. A man died and soon found himself in another realm, in a beautiful place surrounded by the most delectable, delicious food one can imagine. His stomach rumbled, his mouth watered, and his desire for the feast set before him grew strong. He began to reach for the food, but as he looked down, he found his arms were no longer flesh and blood, but long wooden utensils, just right for eating. He voraciously gathered food, eager to partake of the meal. But he quickly realized that his wooden arms were too long. Although he could gather an abundance, he could not get the food into his mouth. Bewildered, he looked around and saw his surroundings in a new light. The most delectable, delicious food he could imagine, there to tempt him, not to fill him. There to remind him of his hunger rather than to quell it. And he was beside himself with despair. As he sat and contemplated his torturous plight, a stranger entered his presence. This stranger too had long wooden arms and fruitlessly struggled to eat. Then, all at once, his eyes were opened. He gathered food with his wooden arms and fed it to the stranger, and the stranger in turn fed him. Together, they feasted and gave thanks to God. It's quite a story.

Not only do we experience God through the other, we know healing and wholeness through right relationship with the neighbor, the stranger, the least of these. Jesus notices the man born blind just as he notices the woman with the issue of blood, the rich tax collector perched in a tree, the Samaritan woman alone at the well.

The disciples notice as well and immediately they begin to pose theological and philosophical questions about the man's condition. Who sinned, that he was born blind? Underlying their question is an assumption that the man's blindness has something to do with sin and God's punishment. Dr. Gardner Taylor, one of my favorite preachers, notes: "It is the smallest, narrowest, cheapest religion which tries always to make God spiteful, vengeful, and every affliction the result of wrong doing."<sup>2</sup>

But the disciples' thoughts are not Jesus' thoughts. Jesus replies to them, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause and effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me." Jesus shifts the conversation from blame to opportunity. Look for what God can do. Imagine if we approached all situations of suffering with the mind of Christ. What if we didn't seek to blame others for the problems that plague us, but instead saw them as opportunities to be a part of God's work in the world?

I fear the disciples, like many of us, have a one-dimensional view of this man's blindness as bad, as a deviation from the standardized norm. It's comforting to hold up the abled body as a false idol.<sup>3</sup> We minimize our anxiety about the ways in which our

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<sup>2</sup> Gardner Taylor, "The Authority of Experience," *The Words of Gardner Taylor, Vol. 3*, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, "Re-engaging the Body: Disability Studies and the Resistance to Embodiment," p. 382.

own bodies and minds are different by categorizing some as disabled, and pitying the ones with a great degree of deviation from the norm.<sup>4</sup> But look what God can do! The God of creation looks at each of us first and foremost with the eyes of love, with a spirit of possibility. The God of creation, I believe, sees each of our bodies as an expression of a diverse species. And sometimes it takes a blind man to teach the rest of us how to see.

The healing that Jesus offers to the blind man is not the most dignified or dramatic. He spits into the dirt, creates a muddy paste, and applies it to the blind man's eyes. Then he sends the man to wash in a pool. Don't miss this part. The man participates in his own healing. Jesus does for the man what he cannot do for himself, then instructs him to do what he can do for himself.<sup>5</sup> In the midst of this healing ritual, the man never catches a glimpse of Jesus. He never has the opportunity to look Jesus in the eye and thank him. By the time he washes in the pool and opens his eyes to the first colors he's ever witnessed, Jesus is long gone.

I imagine he spent that first evening watching the sun drain out of the painted sky, giving thanks to God. Or perhaps he ran to find his friends and family so that he could memorize every detail of their faces for the first time. The man experiences his healing as a conversion. It enables him to completely turn his life around. No longer begging on the corner. No longer unable to do for himself. No longer blind to the condition of his body or the ragged clothes he wore. He is a changed man. And it's not often that one truly turns their life around, so the people in his community begin to take notice.

He is so different that some can't believe their eyes. The ones who have been able to see all their lives allow their assumptions and preconceived notions about this man to blur their vision. He sees the world anew, and suddenly they no longer can. I wonder how often our status quo mentality chokes the first sprouts of change. How difficult it is to live into God's vision for our lives when it requires breaking through the assumptions others have always had about us. "It is me," the man tells them. "The very one who used to be blind. It is me." Some believe him, and others do not. There's a divide in the community over this man's transformation. And so they take him before the religious authorities. Gardner Taylor calls them "the faultfinders who did not see the blessing of the healing, but...looked for fault in the healer."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say, "Mark this! Do anything that is good, try to do anything that is uplifting, and as sure as God made green apples, critics will appear on the scene."<sup>7</sup>

The religious authorities on the scene appear quite unsettled by this man's healing. How exactly did it happen, they want to know. Who was this man who healed you? Can we get another eye witness account? Who can vouch for this man's character if we are to believe what he is saying? And tell us again how it happened? Some grumble about a healing on the Sabbath. How can this man be a Jewish prophet or Messiah if he's breaking the religious law? Others believe the healing speaks for itself, and who else could have done it but God? They haul in his parents, who are unwilling to take a stand for their son if it means they will be cast out of their religious community. "He's a grown man, ask him," they meekly reply.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gardner Taylor, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Gardner Taylor, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

And we better understand their approach when we see what happens when this man does speak the truth. First he's pressured to discredit the man who healed him. Then he's asked to repeat his testimony. Finally, he's lured into a theological battle in which he's told that he's nothing but a dirty sinner and cast out of the temple.

A word about context here: the gospel of John was written for the early church at a time when Jews were experiencing a rupture in the family, a fracture between those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and those who did not.<sup>8</sup> In other words, different beliefs, diverging theologies, and distinct understandings of God resulted in some being welcomed into the temple and others being barred from the door. Some were in and some were out. Some were holy and others were heretics. And it all boiled down to the question that has not lost its controversy over time: Who do you say that Jesus is?

This is the context of John's gospel, so if you sense in this story a hostility toward the religious authorities in the Jewish community, you're onto something. If you notice that this gospel has a tendency to cast temple-going Jews in a harsh light, you're on the right track. Reading John's gospel, it's important to name the characterization of the Jewish authorities as one-dimensional. And yet, the author's purpose was not to irritate religious authorities, but to encourage the Jews being cast out of the temple for their beliefs. John's gospel was written to comfort the broken-hearted, to uplift the downtrodden, to encourage the fainthearted. And so this gospel still speaks to us today. We know what it is to be excluded by communities we love, to live in fractured relationships that we fear cannot be reconciled. We know a little bit about the pain of being told that what we believe isn't righteous and how we live isn't holy. We know something, even in this congregation, about the heat generated by notions of right belief and the pressure to assimilate, accommodate, acculturate.

In this season of Lent, we are often submerged in adversarial theologies of atonement. Who was Jesus? What does it mean that he suffered and died on the cross? Where was God? Did the resurrection really happen? How do we live as followers of one who challenged political and religious authority, one who was tortured and died at the hands of the state?

Our text this morning suggests that theology ought to take a back seat to our experiences of God. I'm not suggesting that the questions about Jesus' death and resurrection are unimportant. These are questions we're called to consider as we strive to live in the ways of Jesus. And yet our experiences of the love of God do not come to us through doctrine.

John's gospel suggests that those who were closest to Jesus were the ones most mystified by his words and works. This gospel calls us to the practice of abandoning "overconfident assumptions, false certitudes, and complacency about Jesus' identity."<sup>9</sup> It invites us to grab hold of the opportunity to discover and re-discover Jesus for ourselves. And just when we begin to cling too tightly to our notions of who Jesus was and is, the gospel of John invites us back into the mystery of an encounter with the still speaking God. The measure of our devotion to God is not the systematic nature of our theology, but participation in our own healing, our willingness to live new lives, our proclamation in word and deed of God's love to the world.

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<sup>8</sup> Gail O'Day, *The Women's Bible Commentary*

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

When interrogated by the religious authorities, the man born blind refuses to speculate on what he doesn't know. Instead he says, "one thing I do know...I was blind, but now I see." Gardner Taylor notes, "this man touched by Jesus has a sturdy boldness, an assurance that cannot be bluffed, cannot be browbeaten, and cannot be scoffed out of court."<sup>10</sup> He participated in his own healing, and lived a changed life. But it didn't stop there. This man testified about his experience. And the world needs experience's testimony about the goodness of God. Observing the first flowers of spring, I'm convinced more than ever that all of creation carries the seeds of God's glory. And perhaps that is one powerful purpose behind the astonishing diversity of God's creation. We were created to proclaim the glory of God's love to one another. The man born blind told of his healing encounter with Jesus, and the daffodils and the crocuses call out even now that God is still bringing new life out of death. What will your testimony be to this beautiful, broken world? Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Gardner Taylor, p. 27.