



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Jesus Wants Us to See

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 8:22-26

February 27, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Kate is a former student of mine who serves as a pastor in Baltimore. She and her teenage son, Evan, were heading home after church on a Sunday afternoon and their car came to a stoplight just before the on-ramp to the freeway. Standing on the curb next to them was a man holding up a sign that read: “Homeless veteran. Very hungry. Please help.” As Kate often does, she reached into her bag to find her wallet to give him something and as she did, Evan said to her, “Mom, it’s just easier if you don’t look.” Kate said to her son, “I know, honey, but Jesus wants us to see.” Jesus wants us to see.

We’re continuing this conversation about “Life in the Wilderness” and in today’s story, Jesus and his disciples come to Bethsaida, a town on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Some people bring a blind man to Jesus and beg Jesus to touch the blind man. That this blind man has people bringing him to Jesus and begging Jesus to touch him is significant. We learn right away that this man was not alone. That is extraordinary because the prevailing theology of the day was that diseases and afflictions came about because of sinfulness. So this man’s being blind was a result of his sin or his parents. Somewhere somehow someone sinned. That is lousy theology. But be careful because it still exists out there. People don’t get cancer because they’re bad people. People don’t get AIDS because they’re bad people. People don’t catch COVID because they’re bad people—even the unvaccinated. But because that is the thinking of the day, this man, who is blind, is unclean and you do not associate with or touch anyone or anything that is unclean lest you become unclean.

The fact that he has people bringing him to Jesus is incredible and courageous because it is risky and that they would beg Jesus to touch him is bold and

audacious. Then Jesus does his Jesus thing and takes him by the hand—he *touches* him—and leads him away from the town. He puts saliva on the man’s eyes. To our modern ears, this may sound insulting but in many ancient cultures and even contemporary ones, they recognize the healing powers of human saliva. Human saliva possesses antimicrobial enzymes and white blood cells that fight infection and electrolytes that help with hydration. Then Jesus asks the man, “Can you see anything?” and it seems that his eye sight is only partially restored because the man says he sees people but they look like trees walking. Then Jesus lays his hands on him again. He touches him again and he sees everything clearly.

Jesus wants us to see.

It was several years ago that I was home visting my Dad in Seattle. We were watching the evening news and there was a tragic story about the death of a Vietnamese teenager, likely gang related, on the south side of Seattle. And suddenly, the television went off and I looked over at Dad and he had the remote in his hand. I asked him, “Dad, did you just turn off the TV?” “Yes,” he said. “Why did you turn it off?” I asked. “Because I don’t want to watch it,” Dad said. “It’s depressing. I don’t want to know about it.” “But we have to know about it,” I said. “Nope, we don’t. It’s depressing,” Dad said.

I understand that, I really do. And there are times when I have told some of you to take a break from the news cycle—the 24/7 constant barrage of news does not help us. It is not good that we are consuming FOX News or CNN or MSNBC or whatever network 24 hours a day every day. A media sabbath is not a bad idea. But we cannot not see. I told Dad that we needed to know what was happening in the world so we would know how to pray and how to act.

“Mom, it’s just easier if you don’t look.” “I know,

honey, but Jesus wants us to see.”

Some of you have heard me talk about this—this moment of incredible blindness on my part. I was privileged to be traveling with the moderator of the Presbyterian Church, our highest elected officer, a woman named Marj Carpenter. We were in Uganda just across the border from the South Sudan, a country torn by a horrible civil war between Muslims in the north and Christians in the south. Muslim marauders from the north had been coming to the villages in the south and burning farms and killing families and then Christians would do the same thing in the north. That meant that hundreds of thousands had left their homes to stay in refugee camps for protection. It also meant there was no food. These farmers left their homes and crops and fields and were relying on food that you and other churches and the United Nations and other agencies were providing but there was not enough and every day more terrified refugees were arriving seeking the safety of the refugee camp.

It was also dangerous for Americans to travel to parts of the South Sudan but the moderator really wanted to go to visit the Presbyterians there. For more than 100 years, Sudanese Presbyterians have been worshiping faithfully. They had hundreds of churches and three seminaries. Marj really wanted to go, but the last word I heard before going to sleep in my hotel room was that we were not going. Then, at 3 a.m., my phone rang and I picked it up and one of the missionaries told me he thought we could go just for the day. He told me to get dressed and get ready. An hour later, we were in several Range Rovers driving into the South Sudan. It took us just over three hours to get to the border and then almost five hours to get to the refugee camp.

They had been told that the moderator of the American Presbyterian Church was coming and they had set up a stage with a tarp over it to shield us from the hot sun. Several pastors greeted us with such kindness. Then they led us to the chairs on the stage and I remember it was so hot and we were the ones in shade. Then the pastors began to get up one by one and it seemed they were all preaching their longest possible sermon. Some of the sermons were in English and some were in local languages. It just

went on and on and on. I was thirsty and hot and sweating. I remember sitting next to Marj Carpenter and thinking, “Why are we even here? I could be back in the air-conditioned hotel.” It was so hot. I remember sitting there and feeling the sweat drip down my back. My head was covered with sweat and that attracted all these flies who were desperate for moisture. I was miserable. This is how selfish and how blind I can be.

Then Marj turned to me and said, “Rodger, what’s wrong with this picture?” I said, “Madam Moderator, I am way too hot.” And she said, “No. What’s wrong with this picture?” And I said, “Marj, that guy is preaching way too long.” And Marj said, “No, Rodger, look around, what is wrong?” And for the first time, really, I looked around and saw easily 3-4,000 men, women and children all standing in the hot sun. I said, “I don’t know, moderator. Nothing is happening. They’re all just standing there.” And Marj said, “Rodger, look at the babies.” And I looked and saw babies in their mother’s and father’s arms but they weren’t doing anything. Confused, I said, “Marj, I don’t know. They’re not doing anything.” “Exactly!” Marj said. “What’s wrong with this picture?” “Marj,” I said exasperated. “I don’t know. They’re not doing anything.” “Don’t you see, Rodger?” Marj asked. “They’re not doing anything; they’re not crying because they are too weak. They are dying, Rodger.” And I looked out and I realized Marj was right.

After the worship service, the leaders took us into an inner part of the camp that was further cut off from the rest of camp with fencing. We were taken inside a barrack and given water and food. I noticed the pastors just stood there smiling and did not eat themselves. Marj told me to eat everything because it was likely that they had saved it up for us—that we were eating several days’ rations. I was eating their food. We prayed with the pastors and then got back into our vehicles. As we were leaving that inner compound, I had the window rolled down next to me and one of our missionaries turned around and said, “Rodger, it would be best if you rolled up your window.” “But it’s hot,” I said. I can be so blind! She looked at me sadly and said, “Rodger, it would be best if you rolled up your window because if you do not, when we enter the outer portion of the camp,

the mothers and fathers will see your open window and they will run along side us and try to throw their babies into the car.” “But why would that do that?” I asked. “Because they want them to live. It would be best to roll up your window.” As we drove out of the inner compound, there were hundreds of people standing on both sides of the road waving white handkerchiefs, which is something they do in worship as a sign of praising and thanking God. I was ashamed and did not want to look at the people but Marj was next to me and said, “Don’t do that. You have to smile and wave. You have to let them know you see them.”

Later, Marj said to me, “So, the next time you are preaching or baptizing or on a plane and you hear an infant cry, you pray for the children and the parents of the Sudan and you give thanks to God that that child has the strength to cry.”

The image of all of those mothers and fathers and babies and children is seared into my soul. I carry them with me every day. That’s what happens when you see.

“Mom, it’s just easier if you don’t look.” “I know, honey, but Jesus wants us to see.” It took two tries for Jesus to heal the blind man because Jesus really wanted him to see. Jesus really wants us all to open our eyes and see.

So this week, as you are out and about, open your eyes and see. See that kid in class who doesn’t seem to have many friends. And see that clerk at the store. And see that health care worker who helps take care of you. Open your eyes.

“Mom, it’s just easier if you don’t look.” “I know, honey, but Jesus wants us to see.”

In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.