



I Just See People

TEXT
Mark 8:22–26

May 19, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Some of you know that I was born in Honolulu. My father was an assistant pastor at the Makiiki Christian Church. When I was 11 years old, my Dad received a call to serve as co-pastor of the Japanese Presbyterian Church in Seattle. Until we moved to Seattle, I really thought the United States was like Hawaii, whose population was primarily composed of people of Asian/Polynesian descent. So, in Honolulu where I grew up, I was not unusual.

It was a shock for my brothers and me to discover that we were actually in the minority. I remember during our first week in Seattle, Dad was at church setting up his office, and Mom took Jason, my older brother, and Garfield, our younger brother and me to McDonald's to get lunch. Gar was holding Mom's hand, and even as a 5-year-old, he had not quite figured out when to use his "inside voice." Gar said, "Mom, I just want to know. Where did all these white people come from? I mean, I thought we were in America. How did they all get here?" And truth be told, both Jason and I leaned in because we wanted to know, too.

The next year, when I was in sixth grade starting middle school, the Seattle Public Schools began their desegregation program — which meant that those of us who lived in the inner city would be bused out to the predominantly white suburban schools, and many of those students would be bused in to the inner city schools. I and a lot of other African-American and Asian and Latino kids ended up going to Wilson Middle School in the north end of Seattle.

Until we arrived, Wilson was virtually all white. That first year, there was a lot of teaching about tolerance and racial differences. I became friends with Wally, who was white. He was one of my first white friends. I remember one lunch period after a class on accepting one another with our differences, Wally turned to me and said, "You know, Rodger, I don't even see you as Asian. I just see you as Rodger." I remember thinking that was really nice.

That night at dinner, I made the mistake of telling my Dad what Wally had said to me. I thought it was a compliment. "You know, Dad, today my friend Wally said he didn't

even see me as Asian. He just saw me as Rodger. Isn't that nice?"

Dad stopped eating and put down his fork, which was not a good sign. "What, Rodger?" he asked.

"Well," I said more tentatively, "today at school my friend Wally told me he didn't see me as Asian. He just saw me as Rodger."

"And you think that's a good thing?" Dad asked.

"Well, kinda," I said.

"Do you think it is a good thing that Wally does not see your heritage, your culture, your family, your ancestry? Do you think it's a good thing that Wally does not see an important part of what makes you, you?" asked my Dad.

"Um," I remember saying back to Dad. "I am not the brightest of God's children."

That experience with Wally and the wisdom from my Dad helped me understand this truth: We cannot have a conversation about race and racism if we do not see race. Let me say it again because I think it is so important. We cannot have a conversation about race and racism if we do not see race. I am sure Wally meant well. And he was my friend and I liked

him because he was kind. But even out of his kindness, he was mistaken. In order for us to engage the challenging and important and painful topic of racism, we have to see that the American experience is different for we who are white versus we who are African-American or Latino/Latina or Native American or Asian American or multi-racial. In order for us to engage with one another, we have to see one another. It all starts with our choosing to see one another.

As Jesus and his disciples are approaching Bethsaida, a blind man is brought to him, and the people who brought him beg Jesus to heal him. Jesus takes the blind man by the hand and leads him out of the village and then uses his saliva to rub on the man's eyes, which at the time was a fairly common healing method — you know that saliva has healing properties. Jesus then clears the mud from the man's eyes and asks him if he can see anything. The man says he can see people, but they look like trees walking.

Then Jesus puts more saliva on the man's eyes, and then the man's sight is restored and he sees everything clearly. Many Bible scholars have focused on Jesus' having to take two tries to heal the man. Perhaps Jesus is illustrating that healing is truly hard work. Perhaps for a moment, Jesus' humanity shows more than his divinity. Perhaps he was just having an off day. I just think Jesus really wants this man to see. I think

Jesus just really wants all of God's children to see.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker writes in *The Color Purple*, "I think it makes God angry if you walk by the color purple in a field and don't notice it. People think pleasing God is all that God cares about, but any fool living in the world can see that God is always trying to please us right back."

When we deny differences, we deny God's activity and creativity. We refuse to see the ways that God is trying to please us right back.

Blaine is a friend who was pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Lake City, Florida. We were at a meeting in Salt Lake City and having dinner with another friend of ours, Lita, who is from McAllen, Texas. We were talking about the challenges of a church that is 89 percent white, and Blaine said to us just what Wally had said years earlier. He said to Lita and to me, "You know, I really don't see you as Latina and Asian. I just see you as Lita and Rodger."

I remember Lita groaning and putting her head in her hands. She looked up at me and said, "Do you want to help the misguided brother or shall I do it?"

I told her, "Please, Lita, by all means go ahead." So for the next 30 minutes, Lita tried to help Blaine understand why what he just said was not just a problem but really an insult. Blaine was trying to understand, but kept arguing back. Finally, I asked Lita if I could

try something, and she said, "Go ahead."

I looked at Blaine across the table and said, "Blaine, how would you react if Amy, your wife, said to you something like, 'You know, honey, I don't see you as a man, I just see you as Blaine.' How would that be with you?"

Blaine was taken aback. He said, "Well that wouldn't make any sense because I am a man, and if she said that, I would be really worried about our marriage."

At that point, Lita said, "Exactly!"

Our gender identity is not the totality of who we are, but it is an essential part of who we are. Our racial identity is not the totality of who we are, but it is an essential part of who we are.

When we claim to be "color blind," we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. Friends, look around. God's intention for humankind is not that we would all be the same. Yes! By the grace of God in Jesus Christ, our primary identity for all of us is that we are children of God. But as God's children, we have different talents and opinions and ideas and cultures and races and experiences.

In her book *White Fragility*, Robin Diangelo tells this story. She was co-leading a workshop with an African-American man. A white participant said to him, "I don't see race; I don't see you as black."

He responded back to her, "Then how will you see rac-

ism?” He then explained to her that he was, indeed, black, and that he was confident she could see this and that meant that he had a very different experience in life than she did. If she was ever going to understand or challenge racism, she would need to acknowledge this difference. Saying that she did not see him as black denied, even refused, the reality that he lived every single day.

When we see race with all the gifts and beauty and pain and challenges that brings, we begin to see the other, really see, as God wants us to see. And we begin to see even in part the reality others are living every single day.

In 1942, my father was 9 years old when he and his younger sister, Yuri, and his parents, Harry and Grace, my grandparents, were ordered to leave their home in Long Beach, California. After the despicable attack on Pearl Harbor by the Empire of Japan in December 1941, in February 1942, President Roosevelt signed an executive order forcing the removal of all persons of Japanese ancestry from the West coast. The notices went up in April, and they had 12 days to dispense with everything they owned — including their homes and businesses. They were not told where they were going.

Of the 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry who were removed from their homes and placed in internment camps, nearly 80,000 were American citizens. My dad and Auntie

Yuri were born in California. My grandparents were born in Hawaii. None of them had ever been to Japan. At the time, my grandfather worked as a mechanic at the Long Beach Naval Air Station. The United States was the only country they had ever known.

My dad had a dog named Scout whom he loved. The orders said no pets were allowed. My dad asked his dad what he should do, and Grandpa suggested that Dad take Scout around the neighborhood and see if anyone would take him. Dad told me he went door to door telling the neighbors that Scout was a really good dog, and he was trying to find him a really good home.

Dad remembered that one man yelled at him and told him he didn't want a “Jap” dog. Dad tried to explain to the man that Scout wasn't Japanese because he was a German shepherd. For one 9-year-old American boy, the enduring and most painful memory of the internment was not losing his house or having to leave his school and church; it was walking down their street away from their house holding the hand of his father with Scout barking and whining behind the chain link fence. Grandpa had tied Scout up because he was afraid he would tear down the fence trying to get to Dad.

Dad remembers Grandpa telling him, “Don't look back, Dickie. It will only encourage him.” And as Dad walked away, he was saying under his breath, “Bye, Scout. Be good,

Scout. I'm so sorry, Scout. I love you, Scout.”

Last summer I was home in Seattle. Before I arrived for my visit, I told Dad that I wanted to write down any plans he had in mind for his funeral service. I always have an agenda whenever I visit — to clean something or paint something or fix something. At the time, he had just turned 86 and was healthy, having recovered remarkably from a stroke he had 10 years earlier. This time I thought it would be good to write out his service.

We did that off and on over my visit. I asked what scripture passages he would like read and what hymns he would like us to sing and who he would like to speak. At times he would get quiet and pensive, sometimes teary. Once I said to him, “I know you miss Mom a lot. Are you looking forward to seeing her?”

“Yes,” he told me as he smiled. “I miss Mom a lot. I miss her every day. I'm looking forward to seeing her.” Then he paused, and he surprised me. Dad asked, “Roddy (that's his name for me), do you think I'll see Scout in heaven?”

“Oh, yes, Dad. I am sure you will.”

“Do you think he will recognize this old man?”

“Yes, Dad, I am sure he will recognize you.”

“I hope he will forgive me for leaving him.”

“Yes, Dad, I am sure he already has forgiven you.” It was then that I realized that for all these years, my father had been

carrying with him the sadness and guilt of abandoning Scout. Of course it makes sense. He was nine. What else would a 9-year-old boy remember but that? Leaving Scout behind broke my dad's heart.

If you do not see my father as a Japanese-American, then you do not see him. And you do not see his joys and his sorrows. You do not see his reality. And if you do not see my father, then you do not see me because he has helped in so many ways to shape my life.

Dad suffered another stroke at the end of August. I visited him in rehab, and he was making his way although it was going to be harder. He died suddenly in September from complications.

I know this. I know in the moment of his dying, he was welcomed into the arms of the God who created him and redeemed him and sustained him. And in the next moment, I know he embraced Mom. And I know this. I know he was then tackled by an exuberant German shepherd who had been waiting for him for 77 years to welcome Dickie home.

We cannot have a conversation about race and racism if we do not see race. Let's start by seeing, really seeing one another. Jesus healed the blind man so he could see. He is doing the same for us by the grace of God. He is helping us see. Please, see.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.