

Seeing

(preached as part of a five-week series on the Beatitudes)

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Daily when I lived at the University District in Seattle, I drove off the I-5 exit ramp and saw someone standing on the side of the road with a cardboard sign.

Will work for food

Kids at home

Laid off

Disabled

Homeless Vet

Anything you can do to help...God Bless

This has probably happened to you more times than you can count. For most of us, that sets off an internal debate. Should I look them in the eye? Or if I am not going to give them something, is eye contact leading them on? If I ignore them, is that dehumanizing? What does a smile say, especially when my car is loaded with groceries? But on the other hand, a solemn face doesn't seem appropriate either. Should I have thought ahead? Kept a box of granola bars in my front seat? Shared a pamphlet about Union Gospel Mission or Youth Care? If I don't have any of those things, can I still look eyes with the person—or is that rude? Is it just easier to look straight ahead at the light, waiting for it to change? Why are those red lights off I-5 so long anyway? Do I give them cash? Do I even carry cash anymore?

Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Last week we began talking about the Geography of the Beatitudes. Mark suggested that the word *blessed* can be understood as “you are in the right place if...” These beatitudes are not our new law. They are not our new checklist to become “good” Christians. They are ways of understanding the landscape of the world around us. We are on the right road...when we are merciful. We are on the right road...when our hearts are pure.

These blessings, this part of our faith geography, do not stand on their own. It is woven in and out of scripture as it is in a parable Jesus taught, a story of four men, each of whom walked down the same road. The first one, after being attacked, just lay there. His pain and anxiety were off the charts after getting beaten, stripped, robbed, and left. Traveling further down the road were a priest and a little further, a Levite, and further still, a Samaritan, each of them in motion toward the spot where the first man was attacked.

The priest's lack of attention is the most surprising. Isn't it his calling to help? On the other hand, I'm sure that he had a lot going on. Maybe he was thinking about an upcoming worship service. Maybe he was reflecting deeply on the Torah and was on the brink of a very spiritually uplifting thought that he could share with others, giving him tunnel vision. Or maybe he was scared by the sight of someone beaten up on the side of the road. Or perhaps there was a moment for the priest when he unconsciously

started to think about things going on in his own life rather than the life of the man in front of him. He thought about the places he needed to be or the work that he had to finish that night. He thought about his family and how he couldn't afford to be put in a position where he might get beaten up. Within a few minutes, he came up with dozens of reasons that approaching the man was a bad idea.

I can picture what happened at that moment: his feet began veering left, away from the man. His eyesight shifted further ahead, as if something important was happening 100 yards past the man. He made a wide detour around the beaten man in order to keep the man out of his line of sight because he knew that seeing the man, looking at his battered body and his desperate face, might cancel out all of his good reasons to keep on his journey down the road.

Something went on in the mind of the Levite as well. Something made the Levite move from one side of the road to the other in order not to see or encounter the hurting man. The story tells of two individuals making wide detours in order to avoid someone in need, in order to avoid looking into the eyes of someone in the midst of pain.

Helmut Theilike observed, "Love always seizes the eyes first and then the hand. If I close my eyes, my hands, too, remain unemployed. And finally my conscience, too, falls asleep, for this disquieting neighbor has disappeared from my sight."¹ Jesus describes a future scenario in Matthew 25 when telling his followers that it was he whom we met in the hungry, the stranger, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned. The text says that the righteous ones asked him, "Lord, when did *we see* you hungry or sick or a stranger?" Their response, or excuse, to Jesus is, "Lord we did not *see* you."

The priest and Levite did not help the man on the road *because they did not really see him*. Mercy requires sight. Pure in heart is like a magnifying glass to the world around us. It washes away our preconceived notions and allows the Holy Spirit to guide our vision. So maybe these men walked around the injured party without fully realizing that they were even doing so. They had no capacity to respond, so they would not allow themselves to see what was right in front of them. If they had to respond to Jesus' question about helping the hungry, the sick, the stranger, they could point back to their footprints on the road which showed that, because of their indirect route of crossing to the other side of the road, there was no way either one could have really seen what was going on with the man.

If the beatitudes are geographic in nature, we need to pay attention to the places where we are already living, the roads we walk every day. If a blessing implies that we are on the right road, we are in the right place, we need to look more closely at the places we live each and every day.

Laurie Anderson, in her young adult novel *Wintergirls*, tells the story about Lia, a teenager struggling with anorexia. Her parent's dealing with a divorce and her best friend gone, Lia's struggles go unnoticed by those who walk beside her every day. Even though her body mass gradually begins to waste away, and she comes up with reasons to miss dinner at home and skip out on the cafeteria at school, her family and her teachers and her friends avoid seeing her pain because pain comes with uncertainty. It comes with discomfort. There are not quick solutions to people's pain and fear. Lia's life is messy, and troubles are messy. Her teachers, her parents, and her friends don't see her, not really. They don't see her and therefore cannot show

her mercy, cannot help her move toward a place of physical and emotional healing. They cannot connect with her.²

I can't even begin to imagine the number of times we have seen the sick, the hurting, the stranger with every step we take, but because of distractions, because of our comfort, because of our life experience, we haven't *seen* them. There is *no* magic way to have our lives line up with the Bible's audacious, irrational claims when it comes to caring for those in need. Mercy requires *honesty*—those who need mercy live all around the world and are actually our neighbors, our fellow church members, sometimes ourselves.

Pure in heart requires our convictions. We actually act and decide and choose and spend as if the Bible means all this stuff, and Jesus was not speaking metaphorically when he said, "When you did this to the least of these—you did it to me."

All of the Beatitudes require relationship. What God says in scripture is: forget about yourself and enter the world of another. Without reservation or judgment, fully...completely...faithfully...close up. Jesus is serious about this. With our honesty, with our convictions, with our relationships—what is the next choice, decision, or action we will offer—with eyes wide open and hands outstretched.

Will Campbell is a Baptist minister, a civil rights pioneer, and author to one of the most beautiful and challenging books ever written, *Brother to a Dragonfly*. In that book, he recounts a time in the late 1960s when he was to be a speaker at a conference of the US National Student Association, consisting of representatives of the young New Left radicals of that time. Before he spoke, the conference viewed a documentary called "The Ku Klux Klan—An Invisible Empire," which showed such horrors as the murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi, the castration of Judge Aaron in Alabama, and the murders of four little girls in a Sunday School class in Birmingham. It took the viewer inside a Georgia Klan Klavern hall where an initiation ceremony was in progress. At one point the candidates were lined up in military formation and shouted the command "left face." One scared and pathetic figure turned *right* instead, bringing confusion to the formation and bringing cheers, jeers, catcalls, and guffaws from the conference audience viewing the film. Campbell remembers,

I felt a sickening in my stomach. Those viewing the film were alleged to be on the cutting edge of social change—black and white, women and men, who had been taking over campuses in recent months. They used words like *establishment* as if it were poison. Who were they beyond that? Most of them were from middle and upper class families. They were students or recent graduates of rich and leading universities and colleges. They were mean and tough but somehow I sense that there wasn't a radical in the bunch. For if they were radical, how could they laugh at a poor, ignorant farmer who didn't know his left hand from his right. If they had been radical, they would have been weeping—asking what had produced him.

After the film, it came time for Campbell's speech, and then he was to lead a discussion on the film. So, he stood up and said:

My name is Will Campbell.
I'm a Baptist minister.
I'm a native of Mississippi.
And I'm pro-Klansman because I'm pro-human being.
Now, that's my speech.
If anyone has any questions, I will be glad to try to answer them.

Well, the last sentence wasn't out of his mouth before bedlam broke out. Blacks and whites were shouting at Campbell and storming from the hall. The next half hour was sheer pandemonium.

Campbell noted it was one of the few times he felt fearful of bodily harm. He later reflected, "It was the first time I had realized the power of words. I had intended to begin a dialogue, maybe even a heated dialogue, but I had not intended to start a riot." Finally, with just a few people remaining in the audience, Campbell said,

It took time to get my little band of radicals settled down enough to point out to them that just four words uttered— 'pro-Klansman, Mississippi Baptist preacher'—coupled with one visual image: *white*—had turned them into everything they thought the KKK to be: hostile, frustrated, angry, violent, and irrational. And I was never able to explain to them that pro-Klansman is *not* the same as pro-Klan. That the former has to do with a *person*, while the other with an ideology.³

There is a mercy and a purity in Campbell's story that is...confounding. I think I would have been one of the people who couldn't hear Campbell's message, who would have stormed out. I could make a logical, justice-filled argument that to be pro-anybody who does so much damage to God's people is damaging in itself. But I also know that I don't see everything. One thing the Beatitudes do is give us clear eyes. They correct my vision, they provide clarity as they work on the purity of my heart. They unblock my field of vision as I learn to become a person of mercy.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. To learn about Jesus Christ, encounter the living God, and to experience mercy, we must open our eyes to the places in our lives calling out for mercy, places we may have consciously or unconsciously missed out on seeing. We must walk through each day with eyes open, preparing to be interrupted.

We are blessed when we are merciful. We are on the right road when we *see* the opportunities to be merciful and live them out in every part of our lives, in obvious ways and in ways that will confound us each and every day.

Notes

1 Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1978), from his sermon, "The Parable of the Good Samaritan."

2 Laurie Anderson, *Wintergirls* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2009).

3 Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York, NY: Continuum Press, 1977), 243-244.