

Sermon: What the Seeing See

Scripture: Mark 10:46-52

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

Date: October 18, 2015

My grandfather Rollin Burhans was a Southern Baptist preacher who served churches in Kentucky, taught at Southern Seminary in Louisville and was the founder of a Christian college. In one of his many sermons over some 50 years of ministry, he tells the story of a time in the late 50's when he went to pick up his son, my uncle Rollin, from Harvard after his Junior year in college. They were walking down the street together when they saw a big black limousine parked outside of one of the main gates to Harvard University. Granddad had just read in the paper that day that Chancellor Konrad Adenauer from Germany was coming to get an honorary degree from Harvard and he assumed that this was probably his limo. Remember Adenaur was the German leader who brought Germany from the ruins of WWII to prosperity, democracy and world-wide respect again.

So my granddad and uncle waited outside the gate beside the running limousine hoping that they would get a chance to greet this world-renowned elder statesman. They ended up waiting for quite a while until finally the gate to the school swung open and two little old women dressed in black, with their arms linked to one another, shuffled by them. One of the women looked up and greeted them with a smile and a nod of her head while the other kept her head down eyes locked in front of her. The limo driver got out opened the door, ushered them in, and they drove off. Granddad and Rollin walked back to their car quite disappointed by what they thought would be their chance for a brush with greatness. They found their car and headed out for the long drive from Boston back to Louisville.

That night they stopped in a hotel a few hours outside of Boston to sleep over. The next morning when granddad went to the hotel office to get the morning newspaper he stopped in his tracks as he saw on the front page of the Boston Globe a picture of the two same two little ladies dressed in black that they had seen the day before. It turns out that it was Annie Sullivan and Helen Keller who had walked by them. They too were being honored by Harvard that day. Granddad said that he hardly even saw them, the two old ladies who were not Chancellor Adenaur but only 2 of the most remarkable women in

our nation's history; Helen Keller being the first deaf-blind person to ever receive a BA, an author, an anti-war and women's rights activist and her remarkable teacher, Annie Sullivan, who humbly brought her out from the utter isolation of her deaf and blind condition. Granddad said how he would have given anything to have shaken hands with them over Chancellor Adenauer any day! His brush with greatness had in fact happened, he just didn't have his eyes open enough to see it. It was the greatness of the small and humble of heart, the greatness that Jesus emphasized over and over again, not the greatness of the statesmen and power-holders of the world. If he only had the eyes to see!

In one of her most famous of writings called "Three Days to See", Helen Keller speaks of this lack of sight that afflicts the seeing and that my granddad spoke of. I'd like to quote from her essay at length. She asks a couple of questions at the end of the segment I'll read and then I'd like to give some silence for you to ponder what she's asking us this morning. Helen Keller says this:

I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind and deaf for a few days at some time during his early adult life. Darkness would make him more appreciative of sight; silence would teach him the joys of sound. Now and then I have tested my seeing friends to discover what they see. Recently I was visited by a very good friend who had just returned from a long walk in the woods, and I asked her what she had observed. "Nothing in particular," she replied. I might have been incredulous had I not been accustomed to such responses, for long ago I became convinced that the seeing see little. How was it possible, I asked myself, to walk for an hour through the woods and see nothing worthy of note? I who cannot see find hundreds of things to interest me through mere touch. I feel the delicate symmetry of a leaf. I pass my hands lovingly about the smooth skin of a silver birch, or the rough, shaggy bark of a pine. In spring I touch the branches of trees hopefully in search of a bud, the first sign of awakening Nature after her winter's sleep. I feel the delightful, velvety texture of a flower, and discover its remarkable convolutions; and something of the miracle of Nature is revealed to me. Occasionally, if I am very fortunate, I place my hand gently on a small tree and feel the happy quiver of a bird in full song. I am delighted to have the cool waters of a brook rush through my open fingers... To me the pageant of seasons is a thrilling and unending drama, the action of which streams through my finger tips. At times my heart cries out with longing to see all these things. If I can get so much pleasure from mere touch, how much more beauty must be revealed by sight. Yet, those who have eyes apparently see little. The panorama of color and action which fills the world is taken for granted. It is human, perhaps, to appreciate little that which we have and to long for that which we have not, but it is a great pity that in the world of light the gift of sight is used

only as a mere convenience rather than as a means of adding fullness to life. If I were the president of a university I should establish a compulsory course in "How to Use Your Eyes." The professor would try to show his students how they could add joy to their lives by really seeing what passes unnoticed before them. He would try to awake their dormant and sluggish faculties. Perhaps I can best illustrate by imagining what I should most like to see if I were given the use of my eyes, say, for just three days. And while I am imagining, suppose you, too, set your mind to work on the problem of how you would use your own eyes if you had only three more days to see. If with the oncoming darkness of the third night you knew that the sun would never rise for you again, how would you spend those three precious intervening days? What would you most want to let your gaze rest upon?

How much do we miss and how much do we not see of the world, of reality, of our lives, because of our busy-ness or because, like in my granddad's story, we are looking over there (wherever over there is!)... when really what most needs to be seen is right before us. How often do we really see the people around us and how "dormant and sluggish" can be our faculties in the hustle and bustle of our days.

To Jesus' question "what do you want me to do for you?" the blind man named Bartimaeus responds: "My teacher, I want to see." What if Jesus asked us that same question and what if we responded the same way: "My teacher, I want to see." And if we received sight like we have never known before, sight into the truth of things, the truth of us, the truth of the world, would we be overwhelmed with joy as Helen Keller suggests? Or with sorrow too at times? Because not only would we see the beauty around us but we might also see the suffering around us in a new way as well. Maybe our true seeing would leave us overwhelmed with joy that at the heart of everything is love. And maybe we would also be struck with sorrow at how blind so many are to that love.

Bartimaeus was overwhelmed with joy at receiving his sight and immediately, the scriptures say, he followed Jesus on his way.

This ought to give us some pause though because we the reader know where Jesus is on his way to, don't we? I'd like to invite you to come up after the service and look carefully at this beautiful painting of Bartimaeus that a friend of the Skinners painted for them, because if you look closely you will see that it is made up largely of crosses though you cannot tell from a distance.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' healing of blind Bartimaeus is the last stop before he enters Jerusalem for his passion and death on the cross. Bartimaeus' eyes were opened and not long after that he must have seen Jesus, this man of love and healing, the source of his joy, crucified by those who could not see Jesus as anything except as a threat to their blind status quo. I wonder if Bartimaeus thought twice about the gift of sight after that and I wonder if that's why we keep ourselves at times near-sighted if not blind, to protect ourselves from seeing the suffering of others. And yet as Helen Keller reminds us, there is so much beauty as well in seeing clearly, so much beauty even in the midst of suffering and at times exactly because of it.

I wonder if from a distance on the hill of Golgotha, Bartimaeus not only saw Jesus crucified but also Jesus turn to the criminal beside him and say to that man "Today I will *see* you in paradise." And it could have been that in that very moment, even there on the cross, the criminal's eyes also were finally opened to see paradise all around him.

I end with a poem from David Whyte that speaks beautifully of the moment when eyes long closed are opened and may such be the case for us as well:

That day I saw beneath dark clouds
the passing light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
I knew then, as I had before
life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
waiting to be read.
It is the opening of eyes long closed.
It is the vision of far off things
seen for the silence they hold.
It is the heart after years
of secret conversing
speaking out loud in the clear air.
It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.