

To See and Be Seen

Luke 13:10-17

Whitefish UMC

August 22nd, 2010

- † “Nice to see you again,” someone said to my friend Ellen. In the old days, known for her biting wit and sassy humor, she would often respond, “It’s nice to be seen!” Thirty years ago, when we began working together in the Capitol in Helena, Ellen was hard to miss—she was attractive, voluptuous, and known for her ability to charm even the crustiest legislator.
- † This last week, a few of my closest Helena friends gathered from east and west to celebrate our friend Ellen. You see, although she successfully fended off breast cancer ten years ago, it returned with a vengeance and invaded her bones. Although we weren’t sure we’d be able to say “nice to see you again” to her this year, she is doing pretty well, though not cancer free. Her once statuesque frame is much shorter, and the disease has bent her over.
- † We don’t know what bent over the woman in today’s scripture story from Luke. It was the Sabbath, the day when all work stopped and people went to their village synagogues. Jesus was teaching that day, and a woman shuffled in and quickly found a seat on the edges of the congregation, where the women were allowed. She was stooped, with a radical curvature of the spine.
- † For eighteen years she had lived like this—for it was more than just a physical problem. In her culture, there was a strong suspicion that a physical illness was the result of sin or, at the very least, being in the grip and under the control of Satan. “A spirit crippled her,” says Luke. And so her condition was not only

incredibly painful, physically challenging—everything was difficult: sitting, eating, walking, drinking, dressing—and relentlessly embarrassing; it was also socially isolating. She was alone, lonely, always.

† We can be certain on one count, at least—the bent-over-woman (without even a name that was recorded) did not want to be noticed when she entered the synagogue. She did not want to be seen, and she couldn't see very much but the floor and the road either. And we can be fairly sure that the other people in the synagogue didn't want to notice her either. She was considered unclean, and she served as a warning to others to stay away from her and her kind. After all, this sort of affliction could be contagious!

† But something surprising happens in the story, and it can happen to us, too.

† William Willimon, longtime chaplain at Duke and now a United Methodist Bishop, remembers a new member drive organized in a small southern congregation he served many years ago. Groups of two were sent out on a Sunday afternoon with a city map and assigned streets to knock on doors and invite people to church.

† One elderly couple took their street map, turned left instead of right, and ended up in the “wrong” neighborhood. When they returned to report, Helen and Gladys said they had discovered a real prospect. Verleen not only showed up in church the next Sunday but came to the women's Bible study, which Willimon lead.

† Now the topic was temptation, and the pastor began by asking, “Have any of you been faced with temptation and, with Jesus' help, resisted?” Most of the responses were pretty mild: one woman confessed that she had been tempted to keep a loaf of bread that the supermarket clerk had not charged her for.

† Then Verleen spoke up: “A couple of years ago, I was into cocaine real big... You know how that stuff makes you crazy. Well, anyway, my

boyfriend—we knocked over a gas station, got \$200...He says to me, ‘Let’s knock over the Seven-Eleven.’ And something says to me, ‘No, I’ve held up the gas station with you, but no convenience store. He beat me...but I still said no. It felt great to say no...Made me feel like somebody.’”

- † Willimon remembers being stunned and mumbling something inane in response. In the parking lot later, as he was helping one of the longtime bible study members to her car, Helen said, “I can’t wait to get on the phone. Your bible studies used to be dull. I think we could get a crowd for this.”
- † Willimon reflects: “Time and time again in our life together, just when we get everything figured out, the pews all bolted down and everyone blissfully adjusted to the status quo, God intrudes, inserts someone like Verleen just to remind the baptized that God is large, unmanageable, and full of surprises.”
- † Just like in today’s story from Luke: instead of pretending he doesn’t see her as she sits in synagogue, Jesus notices her, really sees her, stops teaching, is compelled by what he sees, and interrupts the status quo with compassion. “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” And when he places his hands on her, she stands up straight for the first time in eighteen years, looking someone in the face instead of at their feet for the first time in eighteen years, and understandably, begins praising God.”
- † Bradley Schmeling writes: “She straightens up, and you can almost imagine their eyes meeting, their gaze locked. How she must have gloried in being seen, apart from her evil spirit, no longer that old, bent-over woman, but now the friend of Jesus. Eye to eye, person to person, partners in the life of God. She sees too. She sees God right in front of her.
- † My guess is that this moment of healing for the woman was a moment of healing for Jesus, too, when his teaching was raised up and made visible so that

those gathered to hear him could now see the power of God's loving gaze. She was the means through which God's power was made evident on that day. When Jesus looked into her eyes, he must have praised God too. In the meeting of these two, the reign of God surged into the world for all to see. This was Sabbath, resting in God's good creation, God's good gaze, resting in the gaze of one another, delighting in the life that surges through us when we become friends of God.

- † The woman would walk away upright, and Jesus would now go on to Jerusalem, no doubt with a little more courage that God would see him in his suffering as well. God would bring life to a bent-over creation. God would not avert the divine eyes from a suffering child. God would indeed raise up the dead to a new life and the world to a new future. In the gaze of God, we can see exactly where we are going.
- † We're nearing the end of the summer. Some of us have already returned from vacations, will soon have gone back to school. We begin the routine of the fall. I hope that we have been able to experience the loving gaze of Jesus, who yearns to meet our eyes and to raise us up, who promises that there is no spirit that has more power than his healing and his loving spirit.”
- † Many of us come today with something that bends us over—maybe for many years, maybe only just recently. Something weighs us down—whether uncertainty about the future, a broken relationship, a debilitating illness, fearfulness for someone we dearly love. But here we are, because we come, even though bent over, with a grain of hope—just as the woman in Luke’s gospel did as well.
- † We come in faithfulness, even though we aren’t completely sure that anything new or good or surprising will heal us. But God draws us here because in the healing gaze of Jesus, we can find the power and courage to really see those

around us. To notice them the way Jesus notices us and calls us to stand up straight—even if our burdens seem too much to bear.

- † Why stand up? So we can notice other bent over people and creatures—not just here in church but around the world—a world that cries out to be raised up. And you know what? You don't have to be perfectly healed or able to run or win a beauty contest to become the compassionate hands and heart of Christ!
- † Late one night this week I finished watching one of my favorite television programs (The Good Wife—a fictional account of Chicago politics and relationships) as a trailer for the 10:00 p.m. news came on. I don't usually watch the local news, but something caught my attention.
- † A few years ago, we met Jill Valley, the anchorwoman for KPAX at the park in Missoula. Jill attended First UM church in Missoula during the time that she and her husband were adopting their child. My friend who was pastor there introduced us, and we chatted about the adoption process.
- † So when the reporter mentioned that Jill Valley had traveled to Victor in the Bitterroot to visit a boy who was offering to cut his long hair so that she would have some for a wig when her hair fell out, I watched intently.
- † A little nine-year old boy, wheel-chair bound with muscular dystrophy and in declining health, had seen that Jill had been diagnosed with breast cancer and would lose her hair from treatment. She is his favorite TV personality, so he had his mom call the station and offer his hair for a wig for her.
- † Another reporter interviewed the little boy and his family, along with Jill. Now forgive me as I say this, but that little boy and his family looked like they could have jumped from the photograph of a dust-bowl family—they were what we call “dirt poor.” They didn't have many straight teeth, and they live in a single-wide trailer that wasn't even wide enough for their son's wheelchair to turn around.

- † But the mom and dad and little son's faces positively glowed with love and pride as they reached out to Jill with what they had—Christ-like compassion and some beautiful long hair.
- † I probably shouldn't tell you this, but on many days, scurrying around with so much to do, I might have rushed right past this family, thinking they were a bottomless well of need and bad luck that would just drain me dry. Little would I have known that they would more likely have lifted me up from my frantic focus on the busyness of my life.
- † Would I stop and see the bent over women of this world—really see? Would I allow their gaze to meet mine in such a way that we could both be changed and raised up? Having been seen by God so many times, will we now see? Whether it is the most profound needs of world in Pakistan or the Sudan or the lonely person needing to talk in the supermarket, will we see?
- † And it's not easy. We all need Sabbath, just like in today's story—the leader of the synagogue was just trying to play by the rules and keep the day of rest ordained by God. But even in those times, God breaks in in surprising ways—when we least expect it. And God reminds us that even in our brokenness, our weakness, our need--God lifts our eyes to the eyes of Jesus, to see the healing that beckons when we become compassionate eyes and hands and hearts for the reign of God.
- † There are so many spirits that bend us away from God and one another. But it is in the faces that come before us that we find the face of Jesus. In the risks and yes the inconveniences of relatedness, the reign of God is poised to surge into the world. “This is the mystery of the Word made flesh, that Jesus, now present in those bent over, is for us. By looking, we become the ones that are raised from the dead. In that movement to look and see, we find ourselves seeing and freed.”

† Healing is unleashed like a dust-bowl wind when we dare to look into one another's eyes and be remade in the image of Christ. And may we, too, be the ones that give thanks, that praise God, and can say without hesitation: "Nice to see you." And "nice to be seen." Amen.