

From the Pulpit

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“Sabbath as Light in the Darkness”

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, Associate Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 30, 2014, Dedicated to the glory of God made visible through the life and now, new life, of Sam Gordon – a man of great courage and a heart filled with joy.

“Sabbath as Light in the Darkness”

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Let us pray: Amazing God, thank you for calling us to you by name and sending us forth in love, amen.

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Have you noticed that Lent is disruptive? Every Lent we are challenged to consider discontinuing our daily patterns, including some of our joys. Maybe it’s that rich, creamy dark chocolate we enjoy, or a need to reduce the noise in our life, or taking up the encouragement and positive “take-ons” instead of ‘gives-ups’ during Lent. We do these things hoping God can insert some new life back into this equation called life. We do it hoping we will insert some new life into the world too. Regardless of the year, we mark Lent as a time of struggle, challenge and a combination of what we let go and what we feel called to take let in. Like tulips finding their way to the surface, Lent invites us to grow and reach, even while resting until the time is right.

All of this wondering, searching and opening of oneself, combined with fresh discipline, could lead any of us to believe that coming to church out of respect for the Sabbath, the day of worship and rest, should include hearing messages of peace and calmness... as though Sabbath is a serene interlude, a calm in the middle of the storms of life... a holy comma, as Matthew Sleeth says, in a seriously run-on sentence of a week. You may have caught on by now, but just in case, I will point out that it’s not really the way Lent works! Everything is not as it seems.

Truth is – the lectionary stories in Lent are *irritatingly disruptive*. Week after week Jesus has been confronting and giving new life to people right and left since Lent began just four weeks ago! From the beginning there has been a little bit of ducking and dodging at first – followed by transformation.

This morning, we just heard the footsteps of the Pharisees as they went racing off to find someone to blame for their assumptions regarding the lack of vision of one man. We heard how free they were with their words of shame and blame - as they accused the person and his family. They assumed sin was running rampant with this man, his parents, and Jesus, who they claim sinned by healing this man on the Sabbath day. By the end of the narrative, we are heartened to hear that this young man sees just fine, but we are equally disturbed that the vision of the angry ones has not improved at all. They could not see at the beginning and they still cannot see in the end. Transformation is challenging. Envisioning God with us and through us, is risky business. It is disruptive and can drop us to our knees.

So let me ask you about the event - who do you feel more like this morning, the Pharisees who are walking around in the dark in the daytime, or like the one called blind who comes to see Jesus before the end of the story?

To make it easier, I invite you to wonder about your own vision and/or visions. Have you experienced a sense of conversion of faith, sight or understanding, in your own journey into faith? I would note here, don't worry if the answer is 'no'-- it's not a requirement! Some have experienced the change from before to after, from lost to found, from frightened to safe and others have not yet.

I'll go a step further..., if you have an identifiable journey in faith, or have experienced a Christly encounter, savor it for just a minute... Can you remember anything at all about it? Were you just sitting in church one day, or out at the lake or in your garden when you suddenly felt God's undeniable presence with you? Did you have an 'aha' moment, the way lightning strikes the transformer in the storm, or was there a slow and steady breeze that moved you forward – an opening of the sails to catch the wind just right? Was it “nothing special” or “something remarkable”? Was it more like just noticing you were breathing freely, or were you like Yamba in the story of Amistad – and you suddenly began seeing crosses everywhere? Or, did someone come up to you and taunt you, and then someone else applied spit and mud on your eyes?

OK, so that last possibility probably didn't happen to you, but I couldn't resist adding it to our list. The point is, that God really can and does move in mysterious ways – sometimes we have to just wait and be... the wind really does blow where it will. Other times though, things happen and we don't know it until down the road. Hindsight can be much clearer than the things the present moment. Along with some of you, I know that I have been through things that made little sense when they occurred and a lot of sense, years later.

On the bright side, I remember how fun it was at the former church I served in Dayton when some adult leaders and I drove our high school youth group on a scavenger hunt with cameras in cars, searching for various targets on a list. One target was to locate crosses – literally as well figuratively, including crosses in the ordinary. It started slowly, but once the first person spotted the cross in the telephone poles, the rest of the teens caught on and found them everywhere they looked! So much of our faith just starts with a hint or a spark. The really fun part is that it stuck with them – crosses are now easy to see everywhere!

Reading scripture can sneak up on us the same way.

I have to share, I am not one who ordinarily fusses about the lectionary. I appreciate it's guidance a lot. This morning I want to add to it though – I commend you to keep reading – maybe as part of your Lenten devotions today. Keep reading and listening past the end of the passage identified in your bulletin today. Keep listening to John all the way through chapter 10, verses 1-21. The story today was long, even so, it was reduced. The continuation of it sheds light back on what we just heard. When we hear

the full story it is easier to see how this man without vision, is gradually transformed step by step.

He progressed from hearing - to knowing - to understanding - to proclaiming. He hears *and* sees Jesus, but it doesn't just happen in the blink of an eye. His seeing also comes through steps of recognition. He had markers in his journey that happened in his discovery of Jesus – the same way there was a string of markers in last week's story of the woman at the well. There is a progressive unveiling of layers. And like both of them, our eyes may see things, or we may see God in other ways, until our heart catches on, and eventually what we experience gravitates into, and finally out of us - flowing into the lives of others. Then one day, "out of the blue" we talk about our 'Aha!' moments as if we were struck by lightning!

I remember when I would go to Litchfield, Illinois every summer and my aunts and uncles would look at me and say, "My how you have grown up!" And something in the way they said it made it clear it was a good thing and that it wasn't just about being taller. All I was aware of day to day was that the sun was good, the neighbors were kind, the seasons came and went, and finally it was summer.

When I started writing this sermon to share today, it occurred to me that I had lots of seasons in my faith journey that happened before I could see, not with my eyes, but with heart and intuition. Our physical sight can get in the way, it distracts us. We often need stepping stones. It is possible that the core of John's message today is most easily accessed when we take a small step, back, close our eyes and pray the Lord's prayer, recite the 23rd Psalm and or sing, particularly when we sing, "I once was lost and now am found was blind and now I see..." !

I grew to know Jesus a little at a time. I asked myself this week when I first saw Jesus and I came to the conclusion I heard him first, then began to know him differently, listening, then reading, most often through scripture when I had finally absorbed it over and over again and let it rattle around inside a bit.

Then later I began to see him around the world and then in you and in the people on the street. At some point I began to see him in photographs and in poetic verse; I began to hear his heartbeat through the organ, piano and choirs. I started to hear and notice him at public events – even at political gatherings – people gathered who didn't always believe what I believe, but are always part of God's diverse creation.

When I am quieter and braver, I see him in hospitals, at bedsides and in soup kitchens. I wonder why we don't all do more to visit, feed and keep the comforts going toward the Christ.

He also shows up when I start judging people – identifying them as "that mean person" or "the woman with the attitude" or "the girl with orange hair," or "the one who keeps interrupting" or the one who.... Well you know; you may have labeled instead honored the name and personhood of others at some time too.

Try as we may, we human beings are prone to defining one another by attributes instead of getting acquainted. If I label you, I keep a safe distance from you. The Pharisees never even recognized the man by name, they just assumed they knew him and tagged him as the blind man – but then it was clear they did not know him at all.

His family chose not to stand up for him – probably out of fear of being cast out. But when push came to shove, the man was fine with being cast out from the temple....because there was Jesus welcoming him with open arms. Not a bad gig...

It seems to me that God has shown up here with us this morning to remind us we are not identified by God simply by what we look like, or whether we are married or single, know or understand our sexual orientation, have a job, are unemployed, have money or only have lint in our pockets. God knows we are not categorized by body size or shape, by what languages we speak or what medications or street drugs we have taken. God does not parse us out like beans to be sorted or dollars collected.

In the end, the man who cannot see doesn't actually have his sight 'restored' at all— *Jesus gives him sight, something that he never had.* Jesus created something new for him. And slowly, over the next passages—those we read this morning and those you will read at home later today—slowly, this man becomes a new creation.

God does not define him by his lack of sight... instead, God's love is communicated and the man is made new through the state of the art form of medicine of the day -- amid the spit and the mud and washing in the water Jesus sends him to wash in. And best of all, when the story we hear is over – it continues through us.

Our challenge is not to slide backwards. We humans waste a lot of time creating and recreating the same problem over and over again out of fear, or stubbornness, or just plain bad habit.

Consider the marriage or the family or congregation that has had too much practice being ornery and the same problem just keeps resurfacing over and over again. Thanks be to God the world does not revolve around the ups and downs of the movie stars, political parties, large bank accounts, gossip or crankiness because it's clear you and I spend too much time defining our lives and systems by crazy things like these.

The good, disruptive news is that Lent is a time to consider new ways, so here's our challenge: Just think what amazing things we will see and celebrate if we spend most of our time looking for the good that is in us and around us! I don't mean for us to ignore needs of others, rather, focus on the good we can do to reach out and make a difference; and what it will be like to fight the causes that underlie the disparity of needs; and then -- how much stronger families, neighborhoods and cities will be when we get up and celebrate the work we can do in God's name.

If I have any word of salvation to share today it is this – *I believe it is time to step away from fussiness, anger and disappointments and live as those called to focus our vision on what is good and right and just.*

I believe if we invest 99.9% of our time focused on God's creativity, the world will change for the better and we will have participated in the change. It is time for us live as though we *believe* in the 23rd Psalm that goodness and mercy shall not just *follow* us... but in knowing that these words in the 23rd Psalm can also be marvelously translated as *God's goodness and mercy shall pursue us all the days of our lives...* It is time for us to be open to God, amen.

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