

With Eyes to See

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

October 11, 2020

Mark 12:41-44

In an earlier sermon I described my morning walks through downtown Winston-Salem. I noted that at 7:30 the streets are virtually empty except for sidewalk sweepers and a few homeless people. But if I wait an hour or so, the scene is entirely different. There is the beginning of a bustle as coffee shops empty their patrons onto the sidewalks, shop owners hurry to open for the day, and lawyers head for the courthouse.

It is a great time for people watching. I'm retired. I'm not going anywhere in particular, except completing my morning route. So, I notice people as we pass on the sidewalk. What I notice is that no one is noticing me. No one looks me in the eye. But then, they don't seem to be noticing each other either.

Some are looking at the sidewalk, head down. Not exactly like "quarry-slave(s) at night, scourged to (their) dungeon," to quote William Cullen Bryant, but you don't get the impression that they are particularly enthusiastic about whatever they think the day holds.

Other people stare straight ahead, as if hypnotized by some object on the far horizon. Some of them have earbuds, so I figure that they're listening to Morning Edition. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Whatever they're listening to, they're tuning out whatever is happening around them.

Still others are on their phones, taking care of business, getting to work before they get to work. Judging by the expressions on their faces, they are dealing with serious issues, talking about weighty matters. I figure that they must be important people. They are pre-occupied -- occupied ahead of time.

It occurs to me that these are habitual ways of not-seeing, maybe intentional ways of not-seeing. They see, but they don't see. They see, but what they see doesn't register. They see, but they gain nothing from seeing.

They don't see David. David is the guy in the white pickup truck with the 100-gallon container of water and a pump in the back. He works for a company that has a contract with the city to beautify downtown. His job is to water the flowers on Fourth Street, 300 gallons of water every other day in the heat of the summer. If passersby wondered why the flowers downtown were so luxurious while their Impatiens had grown impatient and shriveled up and died, David is the explanation. If you're wondering how you can pour 300 gallons of water on flowers when you have only a 100-gallon container, the answer is fire hydrants. (Which I think is funny, because fire hydrants is not the answer to very many questions.)

Passersby who look straight ahead hypnotically or listen to music or stare at the sidewalk don't see David. Just as Jesus' disciples didn't see the poor widow put two small coins in the temple coffers. We know they didn't see her because of a clue that Mark hid in our text.

The incident took place in the last week of Jesus' life. He had come to Jerusalem for Passover. We know, and maybe he did too, that the week would end in a confrontation with the ruling powers, a confrontation he could not and would not win.

The scene is the temple, the pride of the nation and to young men from small towns up north an overwhelming marvel.

It helps to visualize what they saw. The longest wall of the temple compound was 1,500 feet long (the length of five football fields), 100 feet tall (the height of a ten-story building) and 6-7 feet thick. The verse that follows our text says that on seeing the temple compound the disciples said to Jesus, “Look, Rabbi, what large stones and what large buildings.” (Mark 13:1) It was impressive, and they were impressed.

When they passed through the gate, they entered the Court of the Gentiles, an open area as long as the outer wall. As its name implies, Gentiles could enter this court but could go no further.

They would have then walked through a gate into the Court of Women, an open courtyard that, according to one estimate, measured 300 feet by 150 feet. Beyond the Court of Women was the Court of Israel, which was open only to Jewish men, and then the temple itself. The incident we are considering likely happened in the Court of Women.

It was the week leading to Passover, and there was no busier place in the Jewish world at Passover than the temple.

When Jesus and his disciples entered the Court of Women, he stopped, maybe he sat, and began to people watch. What caught his attention was what happening at the treasury, which was either an alcove in the wall or a self-standing structure that allowed worshippers to make donations to the work of the temple. Worshippers were bringing their gifts. Wealthy people were making large contributions. Then he saw a woman, described in the text as a “poor widow,” put two coins in the treasury.

The fact that she was a “poor widow” is an important part of the story. In that patriarchal society a woman was cared for by men all her life; first by her father, then by her husband, and then, after she became a widow, by her sons. That the woman is identified as a “poor widow” may suggest that she had no sons, thus no one to care for her. She was dependent on the community for her welfare.

Jesus didn’t criticize the wealthy for their large contributions. Maybe he thought it was their fair share. Nor did he criticize the contribution of the woman. That may seem like a strange thing to say, but if she had been my grandmother, I would have taken her aside and said, “Grandma, God doesn’t expect you to make yourself destitute by giving to the temple every last penny you have. Keep your money. God’s gonna be fine without your two pennies.” But Jesus didn’t do that. He was struck by her devotion to God. Clearly, that touched him deeply. That is what the Gospel writer wants us to take away from the story.

But what strikes me about the story is much simpler but no less profound: Jesus saw the woman, and the disciples didn’t. He didn’t simply see her; he didn’t simply recognize that she was there. He saw her, her condition, the vulnerable place she occupied. But he had to call the disciples over – that’s the clue I was talking about a moment ago. “*Then he called his disciples.*” Evidently, they had split up when they entered the temple compound. He called them over: “Hey guys, come over here. I want you to see something.” Evidently, they hadn’t seen her. Why not? We know they were awed by the enormity and beauty of the temple. Mark tells us that. Maybe they were so dazzled by the wealth, the celebrities – rich people are celebrities -- that they couldn’t see what – or who -- was right before their eyes. Or if they saw her, they didn’t really see her.

John Philip Newell writes, “The greatest challenge is to see our connection with those who seem to be different from us.” (The Rebirthing of God, p. 19) They are not different. There is a connection. We just can’t see it.

The problem, writes Fr. Richard Rohr, is what he calls structural indifference. “When we are content and satisfied on the inside of any group, we seem to suffer from a structural indifference. . . . People can be personally well-intentioned and sincere, but structurally they cannot comprehend (they cannot see) certain things.” (September 27, 2020, “Margins create liminal space”)

A group, say, for example, the white middle class, gives you a way of seeing yourself, understanding yourself, and a way of viewing the world outside the group. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. But Rohr says that it is not until we step outside our group, if only in our imaginations, that we are able to recognize its “shadow side.” Every group has a shadow side. You just can’t see it when you’re on the inside.

The challenge is to get outside the silos we all live in and to see things from the perspective of someone who is outside our group. That is more difficult than simply walking a mile in someone’s shoes, which is a worthy sentiment, as long as we realize we can’t really do that. We mislead ourselves when we think we can and do.

There is no way that I can know what it is like to be a Mexican father who has been deported leaving his wife and children behind in Texas. My imagination is not that good. I cannot know what it is like to be an African American mother of two who has lost her job and been evicted. I cannot walk a mile in her shoes. But I can do everything in my power, by every means available to me, to find out what life is like for her, what life looks like from outside my silo.

John Philip Newell says that we will not act until we feel, and we cannot feel until we see our connection with people who seem to be – but are not -- different from ourselves. (The Rebirthing of God, p. 15-29) Jesus warns, “The eye” -- our way of seeing, our way perceiving the world – “is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matthew 6:22-23)

The corrective for Christians is to see as Jesus saw. To see people the way he saw them. To view the world as he viewed it.

Those with eyes to see, let them see. Amen.

Benediction

May we be given eyes to see our world the way Jesus saw his, compassion to feel the joys and sorrows, the challenges and the victories of people both like and unlike ourselves, and the courage to act, that God’s will might be done on earth. Amen.