

PEERING INTO GOD'S EXPANSIVE WORLD

Sermon by Rev. Ron Farr

Based on John 9:1-16; 24-34

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A few Saturdays ago, we had a Dream Workshop here at Emmanuel. We looked at dreams recorded in the Bible, we explored guidelines for understanding the language of our own dreams, and we let the images of our dreams take us to deep personal places. Understanding the dreams we dream at night is actually a sensitive and soul-searching process.

I will never forget a dream that a person shared with Patty and me decades ago in Washington D.C. In her dream she saw a tall wooden fence. Peering over the top of that fence were the faces of three little children looking directly at her. They said nothing. They did not move a muscle. They just stared at her with large saucer eyes unblinking. The intensity of their gaze was very disturbing and began to frighten the woman. She woke up in a sweat.

Who were these children? What did they know that they are not saying? What were they feeling? If they could have talked, what would they have said? The woman having the dream was afraid to find out. She just wanted to get out of the dream and escape these creepy children.

This haunting image of three little children peering over the top of a fence and silently gazing at us is a good description of how we sometimes look at our own spiritual life, or the way our spiritual life is looking back at us. When God gazes at us, we don't exactly know what God thinks, do we? And we are not sure we want to know! There are a lot of things about ourselves that we don't really want to face. And so the children remain silent. But they don't go away. They repeatedly come back to us in our sleep and keep staring at us, because we are missing something that they know or that they long for.

Every once in a while, perhaps every Sunday morning, we become these three little children, silently peering over the fence that defines our daily life routines and habits. And just for a moment, we look out into a bigger world, a spiritual world in which everyone is connected and the peace of God reigns. We are speechless and mystified. We are actually peering into the world that Jesus inhabited, a world about which he is trying to teach us. This is the kingdom of heaven in our midst that we are curious about, that we

stare into with large unblinking eyes. It is God's world filled with deep mysteries and beauties, surprises, miracles, and sacred purposes that we never realized were there.

This vast, full world of the Truth that so fascinates us also frightens us. Like the woman terrified by the three little children of her dream, we are afraid of what the Truth might say to us. So we slide back down behind the fence into our comfort zones, where we think we can control life and define it in our terms.

This morning we heard about Jesus healing a blind man. This miracle was an event that caused quite a fuss. All the characters of the story - the disciples, the people in the crowd, the Pharisees, the blind man, and the parents of the blind man - were all in effect peering over the fence of their ordinary existences into the bigger world of God's Spirit working, and they all reacted differently to what they saw. Some climbed over the fence and joined Jesus in a new world of healing and hope, while others slipped back into their own rigid worlds.

This whole event began when Jesus and the disciples spotted a beggar on the street who was born blind. The disciples asked Jesus, *"Why was this man born blind? Was it because of his sins or the sins of his parents?"* Their question reveals a common belief of the time, that many people still hold today; that when calamity hits an individual, it is because God is punishing them for some hidden sin of theirs or some family ancestor. Note Jesus's reply. He says, *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."*

Jesus then spit on some dirt, made some mud paste with his saliva, rubbed it on the blind man's eyes, and instructed him to go wash the mud off in the pool of Siloam. The man did as he was told and returned able to see for the first time in his life. This miraculous healing revealed in part the meaning of Jesus' words to the blind man, *"I am the light of the world."* By this light-giving miracle Jesus begins to demonstrate how even our most terrible handicaps and trials, such as being born blind, are not signs of sin, but signs of God's grace able to work through even the most hopeless of situations.

It is at this point in the story that all the commotion begins. First, the people in the neighborhood start asking a flurry of questions. They say, *"Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"* Some said yes, some said no, while the former blind man kept insisting, *"I am the man."* They asked him, *"How were your eyes opened?"* *"Where is this man that you claim opened your eyes?"* All these questions seem very natural for anyone to ask, and in fact would all be questions we would ask if we had been there.

Then, the Pharisees got involved. After they heard the story, many of them dismissed the account. They figured that this so-called blind man had been faking his blindness. Besides it seemed very dubious to them that this renegade Rabbi named Jesus was capable of such things. They said of Jesus, *"He is not from God, for he does not even observe the Sabbath."*

The Pharisees, however, keep asking questions. They questioned the blind man's parents. They kept coming back to the blind man and repeatedly asked him, *"What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? What do you say about him?"* It becomes clear,

as the story progresses, that these interrogating Pharisees are not asking innocent questions to learn something new or to get down to the truth. Their questions were hostile, used to fortify their own position, revile the blind man, and discredit Jesus. Their final closed-minded decry about Jesus was this: *"We are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.... We know this man is a sinner."*

How sad to see people who are so spiritually dense, so blind and closed-minded, so entrenched in their own opinions. How sad to see these Pharisees peering over the fence and so wanting to have a deep spiritual life with God, but because they were so defended, they slipped back down behind the fence and missed the Spirit of God working in their midst. Are you and I anything like these Pharisees? Are you and I in any way entrenched, defended, spiritually blind, or unreceptive to the sacred ways of the Spirit?

Sometimes when we hear Jesus saying things like, *"Love your enemies"* or *"Pray for those who persecute you"*, we say, *"Oh man, that's too hard. I don't want to do that. I can't do that. Oh well, that's too bad."* When we say such things we are treating Jesus' teachings as though they are optional or directed at somebody else. They are neither. The truth is that we are acting like Pharisees when we say such things. We are stubbornly clinging to our self-imposed limits and are closed to God's amazing powers. We need some healing mud paste to be spread across our hearts in order to experience life as Christ did!

It is helpful for us to track the way of the blind man approaches his life. He finds some Rabbi wiping a mud paste on his eyes. He is instructed to wash the mud off at the pool of Siloam. He stumbles to the pool, does what he is told, and suddenly he is overwhelmed with the glory of sight. He exuberantly tells his story to his inquiring neighbors. He does the same for the Pharisees. He dutifully and patiently answers all their questions, as one would do reporting to the police.

But it soon becomes clear to the former blind man that these Pharisees have no interest in really knowing what happened, but are just looking for ways to reject the man who healed him. So in exasperation, he says to them, *"Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes... Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."* Do you hear the confidence rising in his voice?

Do see how this blind man worked ever more cooperatively with God and steadily grew in his understanding because of it? As the former blind man talks, as he tells his story, as he reflects on what has happened to him, his sight grows steadily clearer and his conviction grows stronger that this Jesus is something special, that he is full of God in some profound and unprecedented way.

How can you and I have an equally engaging and cooperative relationship with Christ? What would it take for you to bring God into every hardened habit, into every defended place of blindness, into every small and large decision, into every sinful or selfish action? How might you and I do more than just peer over the fence, but actually climb over the fence into God's world and live in it?

There was an author who once wrote about a time in her marriage when she was experiencing considerable tension with her husband over how to raise their child. Her husband's way was to be quite lenient with their son, while she tended to be a harsh disciplinarian. Whenever their boy acted out or got in trouble at school, these two parents immediately locked horns with each other over how to handle the situation.

One day the conflict between this author and her husband reached an especially raw and ugly point. The author recalled how she stormed off in frustration, but then decided what she really needed to do was pray about the tension between herself and her husband. After praying for awhile, something came to her. She felt that God wanted her to conduct the following experiment: go back and open a discussion with her husband once more, but this time listen more, ask sympathetic questions, find ways to respond positively to her husband, and make no effort, at least for the time being, to defend herself or her ideas.

The conversation went amazingly well, and its outcome was nothing short of miraculous. The two of them actually agreed on how to be a united front with their son, finally! This is exactly what the Pharisees never did. Though they asked dozens of questions, they never asked a SYMPATHETIC question. They never listened. They never acted interested or humble enough to learn something new. Their main effort always was to argue their agenda, protect their power, and defend all their little Sabbath laws.

The Pharisees in the end learned nothing from Jesus. And those in the highest positions of power eventually made their rejection of Jesus complete, by arranging his crucifixion with the Romans. Such a waste ... And you know, it would not surprise me to learn that they all were waking up in the night in a sweat, because three little silent children were looking over a fence, gazing at them unblinkingly.

Don't let this happen to you. Instead, value what Christ wants to show you. Let him be your teacher. That's what the blind man did. Let Christ rub a mud paste across your eyes, and help you to see all of God's marvelous ways.

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