

SEEING CLEARLY

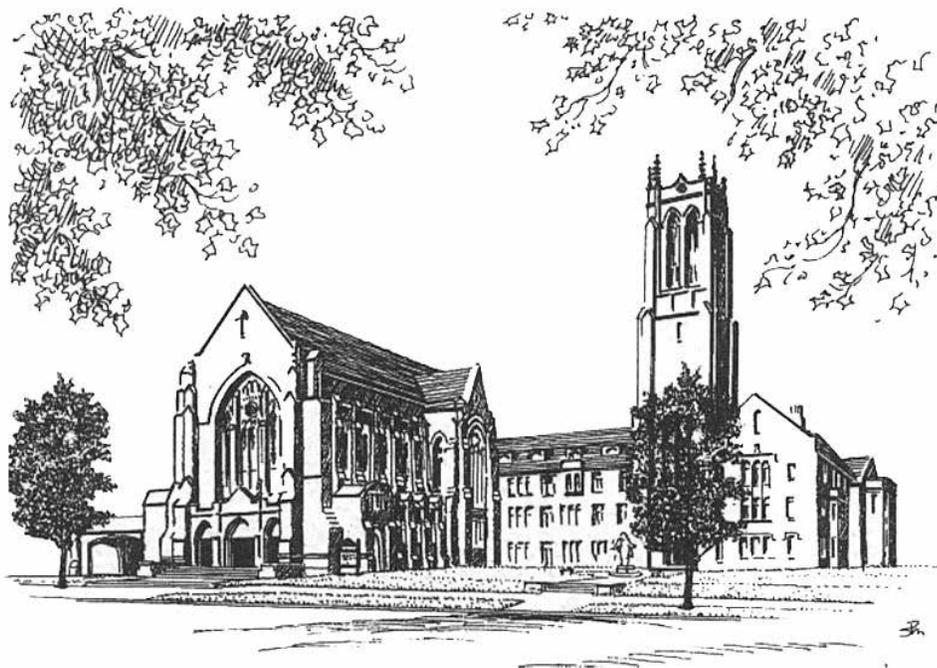
by

Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

October 25, 2015

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 • Psalm 124 • James 5:13-20 • Mark 9:38-50

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.”

Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me — that is my petition — and the lives of my people — that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.”

Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?”

Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!”

Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.”

And the king said, “Hang him on that.”

So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

Psalm 124

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side — let Israel now say —
if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked
us,

then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled
against us;

then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over
us;

then over us would have gone the raging waters.

Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

James 5:13-20

Are any among you suffering? They should pray.

Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Mark 9:38-50

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Wendell Berry has suggested that “to treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it.”

And I would have to agree with that.

Bartimaeus had many reasons to give up. We are told more about him than most other recipients of Jesus’ miracles in the Gospels.

He was son of Timaus or son of poverty or son of the unclean. He has poverty in his story, he is considered unclean. He is blind and now he is annoying those able-bodied ones who would like to be noticed by Jesus.

He has many reasons to give up but doesn’t. Bartimaeus believes that an encounter with Jesus will be miracle he needs to let him see again.

With abandon he shouts for Jesus, trying as mightily as he can to get his voice over what was likely a noisy crowd. Our disciples and the crowd play an active role in moving Bartimaeus toward Jesus.

Jesus opened the eyes of one man, and you've got to think that in another sense, Jesus opened the eyes of every witness to imagine what was possible. Actually Bartimaeus is a hero in the story because he does what many others are unwilling — admit his blindness. Admit his need for Jesus.

In one moment Jesus identifies with the desperate man and calls to him with empathy and compassion. Empathy is what Jesus feels. Empathy might be what the disciples feel, finally, in Mark.

Mark's Gospel most often depicts the disciples as befuddled most of the time. Puzzled, asking the wrong questions, too late in understanding what Jesus is up to.

But here, when they finally hear Jesus, "with heart," they do it.

An interesting article came out recently on this subject of Empathy.

It makes the point that seems to me exactly right.

Before the digital age in which we live, someone who had wronged another was often made, if they had conscientious parents, to approach the person they hurt and apologize. The article stated that often this resulted in that person seeing on the face of the afflicted person, their hurt, and it therefore caused them a sense of remorse.

With digital devices, not only can we communicate by text, etc., but we can apologize remotely, too; thus never seeing the face of the harmed person in the moment. Slowly empathy drains away. We don't notice the impact of our words and actions, and the opportunity to be moved to remorse isn't there in the same way.

Thus we remain blind to the people and the hurt around us.

At the end of the day, we must step back and ask these crucial questions: Are we of interest to each other? Are we our brother or sister's keeper? Are we of interest to each other?

Are we asking for new sight, new openness, new imagination?

God help us if we think we know or see. Asking for our eyes to be opened is great spiritual question for our time.

On November 11, 2011, Louisville, Kentucky, with the leadership of Mayor Greg Fischer, declared itself a Compassionate City and committed to a 10-year Compassionate City Campaign.

Vision: A community and world becoming more and more compassionate.

Mission: To champion and nurture the growth of compassion. We ask: ‘What does compassion want for Louisville?’

Compassion. This is the shared purpose and principle. Compassion is common ground and a unifying force in our polarized world. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect. Compassion is the bridge between internal practice and external change.

“Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.” — Henri Nouwen

Beauty. Compassion calls for a beautiful morality. It seeks to see the beauty in what is, and to incorporate the shadow. If a morality has beauty, it is compassionate.

Inclusion. Anyone and everyone who commits to compassion is welcomed.

Empowerment. This campaign is about empowering people to make a difference in their own life and the lives of others. Compassion is not pity.

Transparency. There is no political agenda. This effort exists to enable compassionate living to help the citizens of our community reap the benefits that come from living a compassionate life, which are many.

Universally Positive. “The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.” — St Francis of Assisi. This effort is solely designed to advance compassionate action and will have no opinion on outside issues.

Social Innovation. Individuals and groups are free to embody compassion in their own ways. Social innovation is encouraged.

Paying it forward. Anyone who participates “owes” no one anything other than to “pay it forward.” People are encouraged to participate simply to experience first hand the thrill and joy associated with compassionate living.

Hospitality. We will welcome guests in the name of compassion. Local, national and international guests will be encouraged to come to exchange ideas and practices.

Abundance. What we have is enough if we share and if we allow it to flow. We have the capacity to provide what we need in the face of the human condition.

Awareness/Understanding. We strive to keep compassion in our daily thoughts and practice and to understand the meaning of compassion and its relation to charity, justice, and good works. We become increasingly aware of how we practice compassion and of opportunities to grow our practice of compassion.

Intention. We make a conscious choice to continually grow both our commitment and capacity for compassion. Our commitment to compassion moves us to practice compassion where we are able.

Compassion has a name for us dear sisters and brothers. Compassion is embodied, incarnate in the flesh and it is Jesus.

None of us know how to be compassionate out of thin air.

When we come to grips with the deep compassion of Jesus for us and all of humanity, we then can work with heart (the meaning of compassion), we can then work with heart in this world.

When I vote this Fall and next, this is what I am looking for in a candidate. This isn't mere idealism. Compassion calls us to loving and difficult decisions. So whether it is pensions, or potholes, or the HERO ordinance, or the feeding ordinance — the vision of a compassionate city for the future is what should drive us. Make no mistakes; this comes with hard choices in order that the future might be as compassionate as one for the current. Hard financial decisions, difficult social choices are made in such a vision.

Christians have no other litmus tests than that our city might look more like the compassionate reign of God.

Indeed our hopes for worship, faith formation, mission, hospitality in this community of faith is meant to welcome encounters with Christ. It is our prayer for us all that encounters with Christ will happen among us and that our blindness will be healed and sight and imagination for life with God be realized.

Christ comes near to us through people who help us see and see more clearly. These are people that when they speak, I lean in.

Stay close to these kinds of people and become one, too.

The disciples finally did, and we can, too.

St. Francis once visited a hermitage at Monte Casale, where the guardian reported that some thieves had just made off with a stash of bread. Francis said, “I must apprehend them!” So he took off down the road, caught up to them and revealed he was carrying bread and a bottle of wine. “You must be hungry and thirsty, so here: eat, and drink, and come back to Monte Casale where there’s more.” The thieves, once they recovered from their shock, came with him and became friars, friends of Francis and of Christ.

The kind of compassion of which we speak today is quite strange to our ears. When this sort of compassion actually shows up as in our story, we might even call it a miracle!

Remember again, Wendell Berry said that “to treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it.”

I am so glad to serve a master who hears my cries, opens my eyes, shows me compassion, and never gives up on me.