

Sermon for September 9, 2018
Pastor Martha Schwehn Bardwell
Isaiah 35:4-7a
James 2:1-10, 14-17
Mark 7:24-37

This morning we all heard a vision from the prophet Isaiah. A vision of healing, and vitality, and joy. A vision of the day that God comes to utterly transform things in a way we might not think possible. The prophet speaks this vision to those ‘with fearful hearts’:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water.

When I hear this text I remember one of our former congregants, Dan Sedgeman. Many of you remember Dan fondly – he died in May of 2016. He was an active member in our young adults group, and with the ISIAH core team, and he was a teacher in the English Learning Center.

In addition to all these active roles he had, Dan lived with a debilitating disease that ultimately took his life – muscular dystrophy. When he was with us he was in the advanced stages of his disease and really couldn’t move his body much. Amid all of his health challenges, Dan came to church faithfully in his wheelchair.

Some time after I had gotten to know Dan a bit he came to me one day with an invitation. He invited me to come to his dance performance. I am not going to lie, I had a really hard time believing it when he said it. Dance performance. Really? It didn’t seem possible to me that he could be involved in dance.

Unfortunately I couldn’t make it, but he shared a video with me later. And there he was, on the stage with 3 other folks, moving his chair around with grace and rhythm. Every now and then a woman would ride on the back of his chair and he would spin her around. It was beautiful, it was joyful, it was radiant.

In watching this dance video I was confronted by my own prior lack of imagination. It was a kind of conversion moment for me to see that – yes, Dan is a dancer! To behold this radiance! And many of us got to witness that radiance, when he later danced here at Easter Vigil, during the reading of an Isaiah text that begins: “Ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters!”

In my own moment of conversion I caught a **glimpse** of Isaiah's promise coming true. Coming true, in my body – as my own eyes were being opened, opened to seeing Dan's full radiance – and coming true in Dan's body – which was not exactly leaping like a deer, but moving in a way that made joy and grace and the vitality of God visible. Here was a glimpse of what we will one day see, when God's healing and abundance transforms everything, making all things new, including me, including you. The blind see, the lame dance.

But it's hard to hold on to a vision from God. All of us suffer in one way or another from spiritual blindness. Our vision gets blocked all the time, doesn't it? Our vision gets blocked, when we look at our fellow human beings, and judge them because of their perceived abilities or disabilities, or because of their income level, or immigration status, skin color, ethnicity, gender, age, political party. We limit ourselves as individuals and a community when we look at other people and say to ourselves – in the silence of our hearts - well, that person isn't worth my time; that person isn't even worth looking at...

We make judgments all the time that limit the scope of our concern – and at the same time, as the scope of our concern gets limited, so do our possibilities, for growth, for connection, for growing into the fullness of the life that God desires for us.

The letter to James convicts us this morning in our spiritual blindness, in our failure of vision. As much as we SAY with our lips – yes, we are all equal children of God! - favoritism and partiality easily creeps into the church...and it corrupts our witness, it blocks us up from what God might be up to in this place.

But the good news is, God doesn't leave us stuck there. Sometimes God sends people into our lives – Dan Sedgemans and others – like angels, divine messengers, who can open our eyes to renewed vision, to a wider horizon of what God is up to.

This morning we witness Jesus in a moment where his vision is blocked. Up in Tyre, getting away for a moment of quiet, he is approached by a desperate mother, who happens to be a Gentile, a Syrophonecian. She bows at his feet and pleads with him to cast out a demon in her daughter. Jesus responds to her plea in a way that really doesn't sound like the Jesus we know and love and worship and follow at all: He says to her, "Let the children be fed first; for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Yes, Jesus compares this woman, this desperate mother pleading on behalf of her child, to a dog. Back in first century Palestine, it was common for Jews to use the word 'dog' as a slur to describe Gentiles. What's more, the Syrophonecians and the Jews really didn't get along; in fact, the people in Tyre where they are in this story had recently oppressed Jewish peasants – the class from which Jesus came. It's possible that the woman begging before Jesus was actually quite rich. Jesus had grown up in a culture where it was common for his people to sneer at these Gentiles. This bias, this prejudice, had been instilled in him as a human being – and what's more, he was steeped in a theological

tradition that said that Israel was God's priority. As he grew into his identity as messiah, he held on to that tradition – that the children of Israel were first.

This woman, who is bowing at Jesus' feet remember – well, she doesn't bow to his prejudice and walk away. She persists with Jesus. She restates his insult – “even the dogs eat the crumbs” she says – and in hearing her reply, Jesus is changed. It's a conversion moment. His eyes are opened to see her full humanity, and opened to a new horizon for his ministry among the Gentiles.

You know – it's amazing how some scholars resist this interpretation of the story. How some want to preserve a perfect Jesus who was just testing the woman....But if we try to bend over backwards to get Jesus off the hook here in this story -- we miss out on a deep truth. **And that truth is that the way of Jesus is the way of conversion – not the way of perfection.** Jesus shows us that in his very body here.

We are called to be opened, every day, to the way of God. To have our vision renewed, every day. Each day we can remember that this is what life as a baptized Christian is about – we daily are called, to die to the ways of sin that would separate us from God and each other, and to rise again to new life, new vision. We each can remember this, as Martin Luther did, every morning, as we wash our face, that we are drawn in again to this way of conversion. But may we also have courage and wisdom from the Spirit of God as well, to be converted in the very moment of encountering someone who challenges our assumptions.

This fall we as a congregation are thinking about how God calls us into the work of building a culture of peace. As we consider our calling to be peacemakers this season, let's remember that peacemaking isn't just this external work of protesting war. It involves the hard – and joyful - internal work of conversion, over and over – of having our vision renewed. God gives us that vision, in the words of Isaiah, in the way of Jesus; and when we pray, we get in touch with these words and visions of God and we open ourselves to conversion. Henri Nouwen writes in his book on the spirituality of peacemaking that prayer is “the most radical peace act we can imagine” precisely because we are opening ourselves up to conversion.

We need each other and words of God to transform us in an ongoing way into the peacemakers God has called us to be. So as we kick off our fall together, let's take a moment here to look around the room. To take in this vision, of all the people that the Spirit has called and gathered to this place. To take in the radical truth that all of us are called here not just to sit unchanged, but to be converted again to the vision of shalom – of peace and wholeness - that God has for us.

As we take that in, I want to invite us to take a moment to bless each other. So everyone, find a partner, or two partners if you need to find a group of three. Make sure everyone has a partner! Pair up and I'll give you the words.

I invite you to say these words of blessing: “May God renew your vision today – be opened!”

May the God who has led us here, bless us all with fresh vision, this day and every day.
Amen.