

Let Me See Again

There's a wonderful scene in *Go Set A Watchman*, where Scout, who is now called a very proper "Jean Louise", is in a rather heated argument with her uncle, Dr. Finch.

I am not giving anything away to say that *Watchman* is a story about race and awareness. Dr. Finch draws a somewhat elusive analogy and Jean Louise, who is rather naïve, reacts.

"But I don't get the connection," she says.

"That's because you haven't looked," he replied.

And that is when he uttered the line that I remembered even after I finished the book:

"You've never opened your eyes."¹

A little while back, I bought a new-to-me car that has what it calls "Blind Spot Detection." It flashes a bright strobe-light at you when there is something close to the car that it perceives you are about to hit. It's not perfect – I have very nearly started a panic maneuver to avoid my neighbor's garage but by and large it has helped me to avoid plowing into a least a few cars on Kelly Drive. It's a wonderful feature.

But I've never encountered blind-spot detection in real life.

In real life, blind-spots are not so easily detected. And very significant things can lurk in our blind spots. Racism lives in the blind spots. Religious intolerance lurks in the blind spots. Homophobia hides out where we can't see it.

But miracles can live in the blind spots too.

The Gospel lection for today has set us up to talk about miracles. Jesus is walking along with his disciples, and in Mark's version of Gospel story, this is the part where Jesus is about to turn toward Jerusalem, and we know what happens there – lurking in Jerusalem is the cross. It has been foreshadowed and hinted at – we know it's coming, but for just a minute more, Jesus is enjoying relative ease with his relatively obtuse disciples.

We have seen how they are obtuse – a few weeks ago, they were arguing about which of the disciples is the "greatest of all time." Jesus shook his head in bemused bewilderment at their thick-headedness, plopped a child on a tabletop and said to the disciples, "Stop being like that, be like her. To such as these belongs the kingdom."

Then last week they were wandering along again, and two of them sidled up to Jesus and said, "You know, it would be mighty fine if you'd give us the two best spots in the kingdom,

¹ Harper Lee, *Go Set A Watchman* (Harper: NY, 2015) p190

one on your right and one on your left. You know, in the kingdom, when you've fixed everything for us and we don't have to worry anymore – you know we'll be right with you up to the moment you get it all sorted out and we're in the kingdom and well, if nobody else has asked, can we sit next to you?"

Jesus has been telling them that the kingdom is all around them. He is walking toward Jerusalem, he's walking to the place where he is going to have to pay for all that kingdom-talk, and they want to know the seating chart.

Blind spots. What is hiding in our blind spots?

Just as the disciples are showing again and again what they do not see, he wanders next to a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. Everybody is shushing the beggar, behaving as though he was a distraction from the kingdom. But then, Jesus says, "Bring him over," and naturally the same people who were shushing him are now his best friends, "He's calling you, come on, let's go."

It's a quick exchange, over in an instant, and the end result is that Bartimaeus can see, and he is the newest follower of Jesus.

Mark's Gospel is full of unnamed people who advance the story; Brian Blount calls them, "The little people." They are folks like the woman with a hemorrhaging disease, a Syrophoenician woman, a foreigner, and then a Gerasene man, also a foreigner, who suffers from demons. They all do the same thing that Bartimaeus does, but none of them are called by name. Have you ever noticed that?

But Bartimaeus has a name. In Hebrew, *Bar* just means *son of*, we see that in the Bible quite regularly, which leaves us with the remainder of the name, *Timaeus*.

So, the blind man is the son of Timaeus.

Do you remember Timaeus?

Timaeus was a character from Plato's *Dialogues*, written a few centuries before Mark. Timaeus wanted to understand the world, and he concluded it was the handiwork of a divine craftsman, and this is the key: the craftsman was *good* and wanted the world to be both *good and beautiful*.

So, Mark shows the disciples blundering along, blind to what is right in front of them, and he uses an actual blind man named after a character known for seeing what is *good and beautiful* to call out after Jesus and follow him.²

The blind man sees what is good. And then he follows.

The miracle is that he follows. Because seeing means following. Otherwise we're just stuck in the blind spot.

² <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-timaeus/>

For the ancients, everything about life was *always* a miracle, whether it was spectacular in its presentation, such as Jesus's roadside healing, or simply the reality that the rain falls in the quantity that is needed, or that the sun goes down in the evening and rises again in the morning.

The truth is that the disciples are only doing what most of us do, I suspect, most of the time. They were wandering along with some vague notion that there's something important in the way-off, distant horizon called the kingdom and they're missing what's right in front of them. I know that's true of me at least part of the time... we go right on living in the blind spots.

But sometimes we see clearly what it took a blind man to point it out.

That's a miracle.

Do you ever stop to think about miracles?

Perhaps we expect miracles to be earth shattering. They aren't.

They are the building blocks on which creation is made. They're sort of the opposite of earth-shattering, they're earth-grounding. They're foundational. They are the heart of life.

Generosity is a miracle.

Not all of life, but enough of it, suggests to us that we better get what we can while the getting is good, that we have earned our abundance when we have it and no one better try to take it from us, that it is necessary to hold it all. Not all of life, but enough of it, suggests that it is a good thing to say, "I want, I want, I want," because that is the only way to stave off scarcity.

But that's not how this congregation has thrived and witnessed for all these many years.

I've never forgotten a conversation I overheard sitting in a barbeque joint in Decatur, Georgia a while back. I was enjoying a Cheerwine, which is, by the way, the nectar of the Gods, and I heard a father hectoring his son, "I just didn't see you playing to win out there today. It's fine to have fun, but you have to have your head in the game and you have to want to win every time." Not all of life, but enough of it, tells us we have to win.

My friend Bill Enright writes,

"The voice crying from somewhere deep within you, 'I want, I want, I want!' doesn't have anything to do with things and the accumulation of things...that voice is our starved soul crying for God."³

Generosity is the transformed life in Jesus Christ giving of its abundance, growing in gratitude, no longer hiding from scarcity because it knows that scarcity makes a lie of the generous grace of God. It's a miracle. Do you want to see?

³ Bill Enright, Channel Markers: Wisdom from the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. (Geneva Press: Louisville, 2001) p50

Indeed, having a community in a world that seems literally hell-bent on dragging us apart is a miracle.

I still have very dear friends in the church I served for a summer in Scotland. They have been working, diligently, to stave off the closure of their church – the Scottish Presbyterian church is different from ours in that these decisions are made externally to the churches. It's a purely financial decision – and my dear friends there are mounting an effort to find a way to keep their community together. They know they probably won't succeed and the church will likely close. I have been following this process with them for a while now, and at first, I was terribly down about it, even though I've known it was coming and the building needs more work than it is worth. It was a post-war church plant in a planned community, one of the first actually, and it is mostly veterans of the Second World War and I just felt terrible about those connections that are being treated, to my mind, cavalierly.

But then I stumbled across this wonderful passage from Seamus Heaney, who wrote,

*When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall.
Pleasant little splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our senses.
So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some were crying
I remembered her head bent toward my head,
her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.⁴*

I remembered then this fundamental truth: Community is a miracle.

Finding people who will love you and walk alongside you in faith, generation to generation, people who gather in faith, without fear - no matter what – it's a miracle.

Do you want to see?

Forgiveness is a miracle too – did you know that?

I think forgiveness is about one of the hardest things anyone of us ever really has to do.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, *From "Clearances," In Memoriam MKE (1911-1948) in A Book of Luminous Things*, Czeslaw Milosz, ed. (Harcourt: NY, 1996) p183

I know for me the greater the hurt, the harder the forgiveness... Talk about work. But it's even more work to nurse that grudge. Peter Gomes writes, "It takes a lot of work to maintain anger and estrangement. Those of you who have been involved in maintaining your share of your family's feuds all these years *know* how hard it is to remember that you are supposed to be thoroughly disgusted with your sister-in-law for something she did forty years ago."⁵

And when the hurt was yesterday, and last week? It's the hardest thing people of faith have to do; to forgive. It happens in fits and spurts, it comes in drips and drabs, and one day, you're free and you don't have to do all that work anymore.

It's a miracle. Do you want to see?

Love is a miracle – think of that – can you manufacture feelings? I try, but I find so much more than love wells up from within. Perhaps the most famous passage about love is Paul's hymn in First Corinthians and it only describes love. It cannot explain it. So it tells us that that it is patient, kind, not envious, boastful or rude, and tells us what love does: That it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

It's a miracle – do you want to see?

Life is a miracle. Forgiveness is a miracle. Generosity is a miracle. Love is a miracle. Community is a miracle.

Are these all the miracles? Oh no. Not at all, not by a long shot. Not if we'll open our eyes. Not if we will move out of the blind places, just like when the miracle happened, and the son of the seeker of goodness and beauty followed.

Do you want to see? You'll have to open your eyes.

Do you want to see? Sometimes what you see will be terrible.

Do you want to see? Sometimes what you see will be beautiful.

Do you want to see? You'll have to follow.

Do you want to see?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁵ Peter Gomes, *An Impossible Ethic* in Sermons from Duke Chapel. (Duke University Press: Durham, 2005) p312