



CLOSE YOUR EYES

March 26, 2017, The Fourth Sunday of Lent

1 Samuel 16:6-13; Ephesians 5:8-14;

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Gracious and loving God, “in David you chose a king whose heart was bigger than his stature.” Create in us this day, clean and willing hearts, and renew a right spirit in each of us. Amen.

Have you ever closed your eyes so you can see an old memory more vividly? Oftentimes people close their eyes to think more clearly, to see more clearly, so they can almost relive the memory, can almost touch it, taste it and smell it. Or perhaps you can recall in the past closing your eyes to retrace your steps to find something you’ve lost.

It’s amazing how sometimes when we close our eyes and focus on a past event, we can see our surroundings so much more clearly. How what we passed by was so insignificant at the time, but then when relived, relooked at, re-experienced or seen, it can become so much more meaningful as we look back to remember. As we look back with our eyes closed so we can see what was going on all around us.

Sometimes we can see, or take in, our surroundings more after the fact just by stopping and giving it a bit more time than we did the first run through. By looking back at the scene on a deeper level. Because things may look much different when given the opportunity of being seen by more than just a cursory first glance.

Perhaps it’s time we all closed our eyes. Closed them to the way that the world sees everything and open them to the way that the Lord does. To look deep within



our hearts to the Words that God has implanted in us, so that we may use them as the lens from which to see the world and to see each other's hearts as opposed to judging people and making conclusions about them based solely on their outward appearances.

So often the taller man gets the job. Many times the prettier person gets the promotion or gets heard by the group more. And way too often the woman gets passed by all together.

Well then, let's close our eyes so we can see. So that we can truly see. Let's close our eyes so we can see a person the way that God sees them. So we can love them the way God loves them, whether they are our friends or our enemies. So, as the Ephesians text for today says, Christ's love can shine on us and brightly through us.

In a daily devotional book that I am reading for these forty days of Lent, it says, "Lent is about noticing our blindness and seeing differently. I invite you, during [this season of] Lent, to see differently, maybe even for the first time. To see past your anxiety, your greed, your fear, your control. See yourself as the sheep of this Good Shepherd, as the traveler in God's good valley, as the citizen at home in God's good house. You will, when you see truly, be free and joyous and generous, unencumbered and grateful. Desire one thing: God's presence. And you will be less driven by all those phony desires that matter not at all." (Walter Brueggemann)

After our last Session meeting, a week and a half ago, as several Elders and I were getting ready to leave the church, I had the pleasure of bumping into Susan Appleby and her youngest son Mikey. If you don't know him, Mikey is a very inquisitive and thoughtful young man and I always love getting to hear what he is thinking about. Or to have a conversation with him and have him help me see something in this world in a completely different way. Perhaps, he sees things in a way that is truly from the heart and not necessarily of the world. Funny thing is, he also happens to be the youngest son of three, ruddy, and perhaps good looking like



David was when his father brought him out of the sheep pen to meet Samuel and to be anointed king.

Occasionally, when Mikey and I are engaged in a conversation, he will come right out and say what's on his mind and sometimes that can be a little off-putting or can catch me a little off guard. So that Wednesday night, after the Session Meeting, like he usually does, Mikey came right out and said, "Adam, why would we change the Friday Night Dinner Program to another night of the week?"

"Well, Mikey," I said hesitantly, "there are lots of reasons for that discussion." At first I cautiously looked to Susan to rescue me but then pushed on. "For starters, Mikey, before I had arrived at the Brick Church as a minister, Friday Night Dinner Program had dwindled down to an average of three to five guests from the Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter. And the volunteer base of youth were mostly non-members of Brick Church, just any old kids from around the neighborhood needing to fulfill community service hours."

"Then, as we worked on things we were able to bulk up the average number of guests from Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter to anywhere between 10 and 15 guests on a consistent basis. As well as have 10, 15 or even more youth volunteers from the Brick Church come out on Friday nights and help with the meal. But now, because of some changes within NCS we are back down to seeing only three to five guests per meal while still having lots of Brick Church youth and their family members come help. And NCS believes that if we change the night of the week that we have the meal, we will get more guests coming back up from NCS again."

"But please don't get me wrong Mikey, those three to five guests love it being just them. They are able to have a lot of our attention and care, and a whole lot of leftovers, but we can help so many more people. We have so many volunteers and so much food that we should be helping 15 or more people get food, not just three or five. So, that's one of several reasons we are thinking of switching it to Wednesday nights, to see if we can get more guests to come then."



“But Adam,” Mikey said, “kids won’t be able to help out on a weeknight. They are probably able to help more if they don’t have school the next day.”

To which point Susan saw the exact moment clearly and said, “Yeah, but Mikey, where are you right now?”

“Church,” he said.

“And Mikey, what night is it?”

“Wednesday.”

“You see, Mikey,” she said, “you’re here every Wednesday night and so are all those cub scouts and boy scouts and so it would work for kids. Their parents just need to help make it happen for them.”

After that we talked about how the Westfield Presbyterian Church started a youth-run soup kitchen seventeen years ago called Agape. And how on every Wednesday afternoon a very large group of middle schoolers and high schoolers gather from 3:15 until 7:15pm to feed over 300 people. How, every Wednesday, even when it falls on a holiday like Christmas or when it is the day before Thanksgiving, youth from the area gather together to spend their time feeding poor and homeless people in Edison, New Jersey. So Wednesday could happen, we would just need to shift the culture here. To make the change and get people comfortable with the change.

Then that’s when our conversation took a turn and we talked about how neither Susan nor I really like change but how change can be very important.

Let’s face it, people don’t like change because they can see all the good in something the way it is. But maybe if we could see beyond our comfort zones, beyond the way things are, to its possibilities, maybe we could see real change, make real change. Perhaps then, when we look into the heart of a matter we can change a situation for the better. Perhaps when we look into another person’s heart, rather than seeing them on the surface level, we can begin to transform our



own hearts, and possibly even help encourage someone else's heart to become more full of love in ways we never imagined possible.

Then it was Mikey's turn to help us see something more clearly. To tell us something we needed to not just hear but to take to heart. Something we all need reminders of from time to time. After we had talked about changing the day of the week and how it would free us up to have some other mission opportunities for youth and high schoolers on the weekends, Mikey said, "Yeah, well you can still do those things even with Friday Night Dinner Program being on Fridays, YOU just don't have to be at all of them, Adam." Jesus had said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

How often do we look to younger ones for answers rather than telling them answers? Telling them "the way things are." We need to always be mindful that they have insight that often times we don't. Often times they have unfathomable love in their hearts, dreams in their souls for a better world, imaginings of defeating giants like David once did. But are we listening to them? Watching them? Encouraging them? Being changed by them and their really big hearts?

Or are we just pushing them aside, talking down to them, and looking to older, "wiser", less ruddy, and taller people for our answers. For ways to look at the world the way that Christ taught us to look at it rather than the ways the world has taught us. Today, and throughout this season of Lent, let's all be sure to look into people's hearts and look beyond whether they are tall or short, young or old, male or female, and let's all be present with people and see them as much more than just their physical attributes, or their outer shells. Let's all take time to look at their hearts.

And so, here is one last and different Appleby story to help us address today's gospel text about the blind man that Jesus healed. I'm not sure how many of you were at last year's Youth Sunday Worship Service here at the church but it was a beautiful service and the Confirmation Class did an incredible job leading us in



worship that day. And one of the preachers that day was none other than Nate Appleby, the middle son of the Appleby clan.

As the service was set in motion and things had appeared to be running smoothly, Nate suddenly and clearly became upset about something. Unfortunately, the poor guy had misplaced a page or two of his sermon. The very sermon that he was about to preach only minutes away. So he and I snuck out of the sanctuary during a hymn and frantically searched for the missing page. We retraced his steps to the Session Room, through the Chapel, into the back of the Narthex and then had to accept his fate. The pages were gone and we weren't going to find them in time. So Nate gathered himself and we said a brief prayer.

Then boldly, and of course nervously, Nate accepted his lot, his current circumstance, and headed back into the worship service, with very few people ever knowing that he was even gone. And then, when it was his turn to preach. He slowly walked up to the pulpit. He bowed his head, as if he were reading from his manuscript, and he began to preach.

“Hello, my name is Nate Appleby, and I would like to talk to you about the power of God, and I will be talking about the power of God in community...” What nearly no one in the sanctuary realized at the time was that he was not actually reading from his sermon, from his manuscript, but rather thinking through what he had written before. He was recalling the sermon he had written from his memory. It was beautiful to watch. As he kept going he got more and more comfortable... and he started to recall his stories and to relive them right there in front of all of us. It was magnificent. He dug into his heart and his stories came alive for all of us that day. It was as if he looked to God, who was in his heart, for the message, and then saw his memories and relived them again.

Maybe that's when it really stuck with him, came alive again, and became even more a part of him and who he is. Often times we read and we study and we write but we don't always know what we've learned until after we've actually used it, said it, owned it, and gotten it into our bones. Just because we saw the words on



paper doesn't mean we saw it with more than our mind. Sometimes we need to see things with our hearts for them to become a real part of us.

In the same daily devotional I quoted from earlier in this sermon, Walter Brueggemann had written about Jesus, saying that He is “the clue to reality. The source of light, sight, discernment, understanding. [He is] the entry into truth.”

Where do we find that clue to reality, that source of light? None other than in the words of Scripture and in the depths of our hearts. But are we looking there? If so, when and how? If we don't take time to hear God through scripture, and quiet time and prayer, how will our hearts ever change? How will we ever see? Isn't it time we all closed our eyes so we can really see?

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