



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Manisha and I went down to Indianapolis for a gathering of the Lilly Endowment to oversee one of the grants that we oversee for pastors who are in Detroit and Atlanta. And they were showing off to us how we could try new icebreakers with the pastors to really get them talking. And one of the icebreakers they asked was for us to name a time when we were almost arrested. And I thought this was completely stupid, but then I remembered a time when I was almost arrested, and it was particularly appropriate.

In 1988, Jesse Jackson came to Brown University as part of his presidential campaign. He was there to speak about apartheid. And I had coincidentally at the same time, had a massive change in my relationship with God. I had a moment where I suddenly realized that I wanted to be a Christian and that I wanted to dedicate my life to Christ. And so when he was coming, I wanted to somehow get to see him and to ask him how he as a minister of the gospel was so politically active. What was his motivation? Why did he move into politics?

But when I got to Sayles Hall where he was speaking, it was completely full and I couldn't get in. But I had made a study over my time at Brown of figuring out ways to sneak into places, and I knew that there was a window on the second floor that they typically left open. And I knew that there was a large tree outside that window. And I knew that I could climb that tree and kind of step over onto the ledge, open the window and get in. So I climbed the tree, walked out on the branch, opened the window, got one leg in, and then as soon as I got that leg in, the door opened to the meeting room and there was a police officer saying, come with me. And they got another police officer and they got me on either arm like this. And I think they were enjoying themselves a little too much with this part of the security detail because I was being rushed down the stairs and I was being thrown out the back door.

And so as the door swings open, I come out with the police officers on either side of me and there is Jesse Jackson with his entourage. And the entourage saw the police and they went like this. And so it's just me and Jesse Jackson about two feet from each other, like whoa. And he immediately put his arms around me and he said to the police officers, this man is with me. And the police officers

immediately let go and they just disappeared. And then we walked into Sayles Hall together.

And I was astonished and I said I'm here, I just, I need to ask you a question. And so he sent his entourage ahead of him, he was about to get up on the stage, and he said, what is your question? And I said, how is it that you as a minister feel called to a political life? What is the motivation? What is the theology that guides you? And he said, that's a good question. When I read Matthew 25, I read about the fact that we will meet Jesus when we are with the hungry, when we are with the imprisoned, when we feed the hungry and clothe the stranger, and when we give water to the thirsty, and when we visit the sick and the imprisoned. And that is what has led me into a life of politics. Because I believe that the nation that follows these values is a truly good nation.

And I was struck by his answer because it wasn't programmatic or political. He didn't invite me to join the Rainbow Coalition. He didn't invite me to join the Democratic Party. He didn't invite me to join his campaign. He invited me to read the scriptures and to incorporate that view of the scriptures into my view and my vision for the Christian life. And after that brief interaction, he went up and gave his speech and I slipped back out the back door because I had a lot to think about.

When I became a Christian, it was a deliberate moment of revelation that God loved me. And I needed that love desperately in my life. I was a survivor of abuse. I came from a complicated family system. I was someone who was ridden with all of the challenges that many of our young people experience today. I was alone and lost. And to know that God loved me, and Jesus Christ, well, that was one of the most powerful things that I could ever experience in my life.

And yet, that relationship with Jesus for much of the first couple of years of my walk, it was a kind of individual relationship. It was as if I had blinders on and I could only see my relationship with Jesus. And the minute he mentioned Matthew 25, it was as if those blinders came off and I suddenly saw the whole scope of what it meant to be a Christian. To be a Christian is to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit and welcome the stranger, to visit those who are sick, to visit those in prison, to see in them and find in them the Messiah who had found me.

And the challenge was to see that merciful gaze that Jesus shared with me – to see that merciful gaze that Jesus shared with me as being extended to everybody. And not just that, but to see my own walk with Jesus, to be sharing that merciful gaze as well, to see my world, my nation, my life in a way that was undivided, to see it all is under the authority of Christ.

Last week I had a chance to sit down with the Reverend, Dr. Wendell Anthony, who is the president of the NAACP in Detroit, and also senior pastor of Fellowship

Chapel in Detroit. And he was moved and grieving because he had just returned from Jesse Jackson's funeral. And he told me about Jesse being the minister that celebrated his wedding and the deep impact that he'd had on his life. And I was looking to identify and I told him my story. And he said, as soon as I finished telling it, he said, that was so much him. That was him at his best.

And I have thought again and again about that decision to stand with me because when I went into that moment, I was dressed like every college student in the 1980s. I had on a Benetton Rugby shirt and jeans. I might have been anyone. There might have been a good reason for the police removing me from that lecture. I might have been a threat to disrupt that lecture, to heckle. This happens even then, but it also happens now more and more. And yet he decided, this man is with me. And that was a kind of echo of Christ's call. Because what happened that made my life new was I realized that God in Jesus Christ said, this person is with me. And part of that welcome part of that generosity, part of that faith, he expressed so fully as an instinct.

And I have tried to live my life in a similar way. I find that moment, which now is precious to me, so powerful in this time and this place particularly, I think of this exchange because today's gospel is about sight. It's about sight that is gained and sight that is lost. And this gospel happens to be the gospel that I first preached when I was in college and asked to share my testimony with high school students. I talked about this whole chapter and I read it all before them before speaking because my story was the story of knowing that miraculous connection with Christ that was as if I had found sight. And so I could say with perfect authenticity I once was blind, but now I see. I couldn't explain why and I couldn't explain how, but I could only explain who, and that was Jesus.

But there is a whole nother layer to this text. It's not just the layer of the miraculous healing that we are being asked to see. Jesus is also demonstrating what it means to see the world through His merciful gaze. Because we have, as the setting of this beautiful passage, Jesus moving from the Mount of Olives where He has rest and reflection and is surrounded by His disciples, to the temple where He is teaching, and there are conflicts over His authority. And on His way to the temple, He passes this person who has been born blind, who has been excluded from that movement.

The person born blind is stuck. He's stuck not only because he doesn't have the funds to make it into the temple, but he's stuck because there is a kind of bad theology that is reigning that the disciples ask him about. They believe because he is blind, he must have sinned, and if he hadn't sinned, it must have been his parents. And therefore this person was unworthy. And Jesus instead corrects the record and says, no, it's not that this man has sinned or his parents. It's so that the glory of God could be revealed.

Jesus, in other words, shows a kind of merciful gaze that He shows through everything He is doing at this point. And that merciful gaze is an invitation to the disciples and to the religious authorities to see things as He sees them. And some struggle because they cannot let go of the fact that this person is worthy. Some struggle because they cannot imagine Jesus healing on the Sabbath, which was sacred. Some struggle because they cannot imagine a God whose love is as wide as the one Jesus is preaching about. And so they get a kind of punishment of losing their sight.

So in today's gospel, you have someone gaining their sight, and then you see some losing their sight because they're not willing to see things through the merciful gaze of Jesus. They're not willing to see themselves through the merciful gaze of Jesus. They're not willing to see others through the merciful gaze of Jesus.

So today's gospel is an invitation to us to recognize all those points at which we have a decision to make about what we are willing to see, about how and who we are willing to see, about what are the obligations to Christians if we want to live an undivided life and see the work of our community as being wider than merely our own individual needs or concerns. This is an invitation to step away from all the spiritual blindness that afflicts us.

And we all struggle with it. Part of the reason why I loved this passage as a younger person is, I love the way the man who was born blind describes his faith journey. He doesn't have every answer. He doesn't know exactly who Jesus is. When he's asked by the Pharisees, he says he is a prophet, and that's his attempt to say that Jesus is the most important person he's ever met. And then as he proceeds, he sees him as a savior.

You and I are in a similar kind of journey when it comes to seeing things. You and I are in a similar kind of journey when it comes to opening the aperture of our lives and seeing who Jesus is, who Jesus loves, and what our obligations are.

I have three points I want to underscore as we go through this prayer that we would together have our eyes opened. The first is to notice the fact that what is seen, and once things are seen, they cannot be unseen. You see this in the man when he is determined to not walk away from his Lord. He is determined to stand by the fact that he has been blessed with sight. He is unwilling to be unfaithful and he follows Jesus fully and defends himself. Even though his parents move away because of their fear. Even though the religious authorities attack him viciously, he will not leave Jesus, because once things are seen, they cannot be unseen, and the same is for us.

The second thing I want you to see is that the power of sight belongs to everybody. Nowhere in that passage is there any trust, except for Jesus and the man who is born blind. But in fact, he is the only one who sees things as they are.

And this is a lesson to us that when we are trying to escape our own spiritual blindness, we have to recognize that the person who usually has the best purchase on what it means to see things clearly is often the person without positional power in a system.

You know the old joke, right, of the Emperor's New Clothes? This is an old joke. It's that the emperor was so convinced that he had found clothing that was so beautiful and translucent and light and comfortable, that he wanted all his courtiers to see his new clothes. And he came down the stairs and they were all oohing and ahing over these incredibly impossibly light garments, incredibly translucent. The emperor looks so comfortable until a child says the emperor is nude. He has no clothes on.

What does this teach us? It teaches us that the person with sometimes the greatest insight as to the truth is the person who is without positional power. It's the child who has no authority, who has no standing, but whose witness is true.

And the third thing I want you to see is that the challenge is not between an old theology and a new theology. The challenge is not in our own time between people who focus on personal conversion and people who focus on prophetic work. In fact, the challenge is between seeing in part and seeing in whole.

We have in this church a wonderful history of visionary Christians, written on the tableau of this fresco, who have always seen our obligations to each other and our obligations to the world as of the same. And that is what I wanted to lift up for you today in the little piece of art that I'm sharing with you. On the bulletin, you can see this wonderful image of Toyohiko Kagawa. And he is someone who was put in right on the left side as you're coming up. I guess that would be the north side of the fresco. As you're coming up, you'll see him positioned right beneath the Holy Family as they're making their flight into Egypt.

And that image of him was done by Kat McEwen. We know very little about why she did, except it says Kagawa. And the reason why there isn't so much written about him is in the early 20th century, Toyohiko Kagawa was the most famous evangelist in the world. He had converted to Christianity after his parents died, and dedicated himself to living in a slum in Kobe Japan. He took over a small shack that had been abandoned because someone had died there and the denizens were afraid that a ghost was living there. And out of the love of God, he sets up shop there.

And from there he begins to write, and there he begins to travel. He graduates from both Princeton Seminary and studies at Princeton University. He begins to bring together this vision of God, which is of economic transformation as well as personal transformation. He writes a book that was widely read called *Brotherhood Economics*, in which he said that capitalism on its own would

collapse into inequality. And communism on its own would suppress minorities. That the only way forward for human beings would be to see themselves as connected together in love.

And his testimony of his life, told in an autobiography published in 1920, sold 1 million copies. Toyohiko Kagawa. He was an incredible saint. And it was in answering our vision of who we are that he's placed on this fresco. He was not just a visionary, he was an organizer bringing together the labor movement in Japan and starting something called a cooperative that he did in Japan, modeled after American and British models, that now to this day still has 1.2 million members.

Now he is part of our past and he is in some ways part of our future. He is the reminder to us of the God who sees us. He's the reminder to us that Jesus has come to each of us and said, this person is with me. He is a reminder to us that love is creation, as he writes, taken to a new level. He's a reminder to us that we have to live lives that are fully involved in our walk with Jesus, so that we are not just walking to our own transformation, but to the transformation of the world around us.

As you go forward this Lent, as you enter and walk with Jesus through His death and resurrection, and imprint that message and life of love in your life, in your witness, may God open all of our eyes so that we may see where God is calling us, who we are, and what God is asking us to do each day.

"Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)," John Newton writes in 1779.

"Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see."

Amen.