

## Eyes that See

Having been born into and raised in a wealthy merchant family Francis of Assisi, as a young man, was embracing the materialistic and militaristic values of his peers. Then God touched his heart in a dramatic way and Francis set out on a journey that ultimately transformed his life and the Christian faith for centuries to come. Soon after his conversion Francis sensed God saying to him, "Francis, all those things that you have loved in the flesh you must now despise, and from those things that you formerly loathed you will drink great sweetness and immeasurable delight."

Almost immediately, Francis applied this divine admonition in an appallingly beautiful way. As Francis rode his horse out of town, he saw what he once most despised – a leper. It is difficult for most moderns to understand the terror of that once untreatable disease. Leprosy is an insidious malady in which bacteria seeks refuge in the nerves and then proceeds to destroy them, one by one. Since the bacteria prefer the cooler parts of the body, toes, fingers, eyes, earlobes and noses are most vulnerable. Nerves lose sensitivity; the victim loses the ability to feel, then undetected injury or infection result in loss of blindness or the loss of extremities.

Even apart from the gruesome appearance of a leprosy victim, no one wanted to end up alienated from the world, so most people kept an understandably wide berth around lepers. It was one of the most feared diseases of its time. Francis wrote, "During my life of sin, nothing disgusted me like seeing victims of leprosy." It was said he would run in terror at the very sight of a leper.

Exuberant in his newfound faith and with joy flooding his soul – and remembering he was now to love and even treasure those things he formerly loathed, Francis chose not to run from the leper, as he would have done before. Instead, he leaped from his horse, knelt in front of the leper, and proceeded to kiss the diseased white hand. But that was not enough. Francis was determined to "drink great sweetness" from what he formerly loathed, so he jumped back on his horse and rode to a neighboring leper colony. Francis "begged" their pardon for having so often despised them and after giving them money, refused to leave until he had kissed each of them. In that indelible moment, Francis' Faith became incarnate. His belief didn't just inspire him; it transformed him.

Hearing of the dynamic witness of people like Francis, I marvel at how small minded we can be when discussing the Christian Faith today. The Apostle Paul described life in Jesus as the most exciting and compelling life anyone could choose. Eugene Peterson translates Paul in 2 Timothy as saying, "This is the only race worth running."

Is that how we feel about our life in Jesus? It seems to me that many settle for so much less than that – a tame religion, worship if it meets expectations and "needs" – a discipleship class now and then, service when it fits into busy lives, maybe even an occasional answer to prayer; but is the Christianity we are proclaiming large enough to seize hearts? Does its promise of transformation so compel us and the people around us that we would risk our health or our life to embrace it?

You may remember the modern translation of 2 Timothy 4: 7 that says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." An orthodox monk pointed out that this is a "strikingly Greek" expression that may best be understood as "I have fought the beautiful struggle".

That's a mesmerizing twist of a phrase! We can easily think of what is beautiful, and our minds can quickly grasp what constitutes a struggle. But putting the two together? A beautiful struggle? And yet it is a brilliant description: in the Christian life of real transformation and sacrificial service, there is drama, passion, challenge, and vision – everything our souls need to feel alive -- it is a beautiful struggle.

And without this sense of a powerfully transforming faith, we get stuck on lesser battles and smaller aims; we reduce our faith to a set of intellectual beliefs and a short list of dos and don'ts. This is why Christianity today is better known for what it is against than for the good it does in the world. Author Gary Thomas writes, "Incarnational faith, the living, reigning, and ascended Jesus living through us and transforming us into different people – does not exist to uphold a set of intellectual beliefs and a short list of do's and don't's. Rather it speaks of a process that creates an entirely new

person who sees with new eyes, feels with a new heart, hears with renewed ears, and lives with a new passion.”

That is the beautiful struggle of the transformational life in Jesus, and it will be the focus of the preaching for the next eight weeks. The transformation to an entirely new person in the story of Francis began with his eyes, with his perception -- that is where I want to begin this morning.

Our text for this morning is two short verses from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in the sixth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. Listen to Eugene Peterson’s translation of Jesus’ words.

*(Read Matthew 6: 22,23 – The Message)*

Clearly Jesus isn’t referring to our corneas. He doesn’t have in mind glaucoma or astigmatism. He’s talking about the point of reference from which we see ourselves, others, and the world. He’s saying that if we don’t see ourselves as God sees us, or if we don’t see others and the world as God sees them, then we’re living in the dark; we have a distorted view of reality. We’ll tend to discount God’s mercy, dismiss God’s goodness, overlook God’s power and love. So what does it mean to see with the eyes of God.

**First of all it means viewing our lives from a heavenly perspective.**

On our trip to Nicaragua in June, as we took off from Houston we flew over a development of mansions...huge homes with beautifully landscaped lawns and gardens. But as we flew upward a couple thousand feet in the air, it’s amazing how small these homes looked. Another few thousand feet, and they looked like houses on a Monopoly Game board.

No house, no matter how large it is, looks big from heaven; no house looks huge to God. The things that swell our chests with pride look mighty puny from a heavenly perspective. We need that heavenly perspective. Refocusing our spiritual eyesight – seeing things from God’s perspective is one of the greatest blessings for the believer. It changes everything. By the same token, if we don’t consciously take a step back and adjust our vision to that heavenly perspective, we remain burdened by our limited view.

Think about your own life for a moment and ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I blinded to God’s daily blessings because I’m too focused on financial concerns, health issues, or frustrated relationships?
- Have I stopped seeing people and relationships as important and instead stare persistently at possessions, power, and pleasure?
- Are my eyes so preoccupied by my search for comfort that they are blind to the needs of others; even those closest to me?

When we find ourselves in crisis, sometimes in answer to prayer, God does change our situation; God heals us, restores us, provides for us, and protects us. But more often, instead of changing our situation, God chooses to change our view of things, our perception.

So God did not swoop down and provide a job when we lost one, or prevent us from losing our house; we were not delivered from our illness or our addiction, our marriage was not saved. But we came out of the experience with a new perspective on what we need, on what is truly important. In the time off of work we came to cherish time with our family, the opportunity to serve others through our church; in losing our spouse some of us discovered character flaws that had contributed to the demise of our relationships; or we found that we were more capable and more loveable than we had ever imagined.

When we see things with God’s eyes we see things from a heavenly perspective. **Secondly, and very much related to this, seeing with God’s eyes helps us see people as God sees them.**

Without God-sight, people become invisible to me; the checkout at the grocery store, the woman cleaning my hotel room, the bus driver, the homeless person that I walk by on the way to the baseball game. My human heart has little room for the barely seen. Not God’s! God’s heart overflows with concern for their welfare, and God wants to pass on to us that same concern and compassion.

Think of how many times scripture tells us that Jesus demonstrated this attitude -- most often to complete strangers, to the poor and the sick, but also to the outcasts, the morally confused, even to the enemies of his people.

It isn't enough to see someone and refrain from disliking or hating them. It's not sufficient to abstain from prejudice, disdain or lust. The mere moralist says, "do not lust." Fair enough. I shouldn't lust. But is "not doing something" a sufficient goal for God's children? Absolutely not! That's the legalist's trap. The gospel of transformation calls me to progress from not lusting to having eyes that honor, respect and generate compassion. God wants to transform my eyes from being selfish possessors and consumers to being his servants of selfless love.

This renewed eyesight – the gift of seeing people and situations from heaven's vantage point – needs to begin at home. Gary Thomas and his wife have become nationally known for conducting seminars on Sacred Marriage. In those seminars Gary mentions that for married Christians, God is our spiritual Father-in-law or Mother-in-law. He writes:

"When I realized I was married to God's daughter, everything changed about the way I viewed marriage. It was no longer about just me and one other person; it was very much a relationship with a passionately interested third party." Most of us who are married fail to grasp just how fully God loves the person to whom we are married. As the father of three children, I have fervently prayed that each one will find a spouse who will love them generously, respect them, treasure them. I hope with all my heart that each will find a partner who will encourage them with a gracious spirit. I know my kids aren't perfect – but I want them to have spouses who will love them despite their imperfections. When I look at my spouse through the eyes of a loving parent, I find the motivation to care for her and relate to her with infinite love and patience.

Or move to the subject of pre-marital or extra-marital relationships. A man or woman blinded by lust sees another person as an object of conquest, a prize to be won, a selfish pleasure to be enjoyed. But if I look at that other person with God's eyes, I see them with tender mercy and compassionate grace as a daughter or son of God, and I am able to rise above my worst inclinations.

How can you look with God's eyes at a man or woman and still dehumanize him or her? You can't. How can you dangerously rush through a neighborhood or parking lot, driving recklessly, putting God's children at risk, when you're looking at the world through God's eyes? You can't.

How could you sell someone drugs, steal someone's money, destroy someone's marriage or family or demolish someone's reputation when you look at the potential victim through the eyes of a heavenly parent who cares passionately about their welfare? You can't.

**Seeing through God's eyes also means looking at the future with God-sight.** If we see only with human eyes, we will quickly lose hope in the face of the sin, corruption and tragedy of this fallen world. But God-sight sees the blessings in store for God's people. God-sight gives us fresh hope and beautiful glimpses of what is possible through God. Moses' parents "hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict" (*Hebrews 11:23*)

Moses parents saw God's call on this baby's life; they opened up their minds to a brighter future than that of an indentured slave. As parents, we are invited to do the same. Will we see with the eyes of Moses' parents, who believed that God could create and then guide a powerful life –even a life born in squalor?

Gary Thomas writes: "Human eyes can be blinded by fear, pessimism, shame, or despair. God-empowered eyes can look past all of that and see "no ordinary" future. When was the last time you consciously quieted your heart long enough to look at your children's future or your future through God's eyes? Are you holding them back or yourself back because of your spiritual blindness, or are you launching them or launching yourself into the adventure of 'God's empowering presence?'"

What about a family member or co-worker or fellow church member who seems mired in destructive living? What about a church in the economic and social realities of this post-modern era

with its negative view of Christianity and in a culture that doesn't value belonging to a faith community.

If we look at these people and our churches only through human eyes, we see little hope (and usually a lot of cynicism). But when we see God standing behind someone or something and see God in a person or a church, hope becomes more than wishful thinking; it morphs into a wise choice based on the historical reality of God's desire and ability to transform, from the inside-out!

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There is one more thing I want to lift up about seeing with the eyes of God. For this I have to shift gears a bit, and to do that I want to tell a biblical story that many of you have heard.

It's the story found in Mark's gospel about a blind man named Bartimaeus, who wants nothing else but to be able to see the world as it really is, to be delivered from his personal darkness and to see the world with all its color and texture and height and depth.

It's early morning in Jericho. You are one of the twelve walking the streets with Jesus. You are walking behind Jesus, trying to keep up as he leads the pack through downtown Jericho. It's a mess downtown; people everywhere, half of whom are following you, trying their best to get a piece of Jesus. And out of the chaos, there's a blind beggar over on the sidewalk shoulders slumped, neck arched, skin on bones, calling out to Jesus.

"Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" Everyone's trying to get him to shut up, but the harder they try, the louder he cries out. "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" So Jesus stops in the middle of the road, looks over at you and says, "Go get him." You do as the master asks. You walk the old blind man over to Jesus, and turn his shoulders slightly, until his weather beaten face is set directly on Jesus. And Jesus asks him straight up, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Now I want you to hear that question, because it's not a trivial question; it's a particular question that requires a particular answer. Jesus asks the question because he wants to find out what Bartimaeus believes is possible for Jesus to do. Do you want a hot meal? I can do that for you. Gas for your car? Do you want a hotel room for the night, a warm bath and a good night's sleep? I can arrange for that. I think Jesus asks that question because he knows that most people would prefer a handout over a healing.

But Bartimaeus is an extraordinary example of what it means to believe in Jesus. "My Teacher", he says, "let me see again!" And Jesus says, "go; your faith has made you well!" What Bartimaeus asks for, and what he gets, has to be one of the most terrifying gifts that anyone could possibly receive. You wouldn't think so, given the fact that the vast majority of us here have grown up with sight and have been sensitized to all that we see in this world. But we are adaptable creatures. We have acquired the gift of selective blindness. We tune out and turn away from what we don't want to see – the stuff we don't understand, the stuff that scares us, the stuff that hurts just looking at it, the stuff that doesn't fit into our systems of faith.

Like parts of the city where people live on the street or in cardboard boxes: people alone, people with children, people with addictions, people with nowhere to go. Or like a building where migrant women sit behind sewing machines for ten hours a day. They do not earn a wage that will pay the rent, or feed their hungry children, or buy them a way out. But it's better than nothing. And this is how the garment industry keeps the clothes we buy affordable.

Or like a building that shelters runaway teens caught in the deadly web of prostitution – most of whom are under the age of fifteen, many of whom are HIV positive. There are more than 200,000 of these children nationwide. This is a part of life that many of us have never seen. It is the horrifying stuff of life that we do not understand. But more than that, it is the kind of stuff that turns our faith upside down and inside out, because we fear that so much of what we have called faith is not faith at all, but a fantasy that only makes sense insofar as I do not see the nightmares of those whose lives are far different from mine. **But if we want to see with God's eyes then we must be willing to open our eyes to the things we hope not to see.**

Bartimaeus chose to see that part of life. The text doesn't exactly say that, but read between the lines. It's there. Jesus tells Bart that his faith has made him well, but I believe the real measure of how well his faith really is, lies in what he does with it once he gets his sight back. After he could see again, Bartimaeus followed Jesus. And not just anywhere; not just around town; not just for the day. Mark says he followed Jesus, joined the team, stuck with Jesus all the way into Jerusalem, where the cross was already being prepared. Bartimaeus didn't have to do that. He could have just gone to church from there, paid his tithe, and served on a committee. But he didn't.

I imagine that, just after his healing, he walked side by side with Jesus, through town. I imagine that he asked Jesus where he was going, and I imagine that Jesus told him the same thing he told his disciples on three separate occasions: "I'm going to Jerusalem to be arrested, beaten, mocked, humiliated, and killed." I trust they had that conversation. And Mark says, "Bartimaeus followed Jesus."<sup>1</sup>

In the beautiful struggle we need that kind of faith. If we're going to see through God's eyes then we need to be unafraid to see everything, the good and the not-so-good, the beauty and the terror of life, the light and the darkness. Because unless our faith is tested by the darkness of the world, then it is not really faith at all. Because if I am not willing to open my eyes to the bleak unspeakable stuff of the world, I will not know nor will I be able to attest to the fact that God is there in the darkness offering faith and hope where none should exist.

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This morning we are blind Bartimaeus, standing before Jesus pondering the question of what; exactly what we want him to do for us.

Well...we want to see with God's eyes. God-sight can give us a perspective that changes a crisis into a blessing; can open our heart to the people who have up to now been invisible to us; can make us a better person, spouse, parent and friend; God -sight can give us the ability to see hope for people when they see none for themselves. God-sight can help us confidently proclaim the availability of God's power to those who see themselves as helpless.

But make no mistake about it; God-sight will change our lives in profound and sometimes in terrifying ways. We're Blind Bartimaeus, standing before Jesus.....

"What do you want me to do for you?" That's what Jesus wants to know.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Feldmeir, *Stirred Not Shaken: Themes for an Emerging Generation*, Chalice Press, 2005