

It's Amazing What You Can See and Who You Can Tell If You Just Look Around

1 – Unbinding Your Heart

Matthew 17:1-9

Isaiah 60:1-5

Psalm 99

Acts 9:1-19

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Transfiguration Sunday

Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

I recently read a classic short story by Ernest Hemingway called “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” It centers around a dialogue between two waiters in a late night café about the service they are giving to an old man who sits there all alone late at night drinking brandy. The old man does not want to go; but the young waiter, eager to close up and get home to bed with his wife, pushes the old man on out the door and says to his colleague, “I wouldn’t want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing.”

The older waiter, more patient, more willing to meet people where they are, and with more time on his hands and experience in his life says, “Not always. This old man is clean. He drinks without spilling...even now.” And he goes on to say to his young colleague:

“We are of two different kinds. I am of those who like to stay late at the café...with all those who do not want to go to bed...with all those who need a light for the night. Each night I am reluctant to close up because there may be someone who needs the café. This is a clean and pleasant café. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, now, there are shadows of the leaves.”¹

Do you ever feel you are needed to help someone move closer into the light? Do you ever think God might use you to bring the light of Jesus to someone who is stumbling in the dark? ...Might use you to bring someone to a well-lighted church like this? ...Might use you to bring someone to faith in Jesus Christ?

An old chorus has this refrain, “People need the Lord. People need the Lord.” That is a foundational truth to which we followers of Jesus hold. Look almost anywhere-- the most privileged suburb, the most desperate inner-city setting, people of every condition and race and economic status and nation--all people young and old the world over have basic human needs. And these do not stop with food, clothing, and shelter. People need meaning, purpose, hope, comfort and direction. People need the Lord. People need Jesus Christ, who he is, the Son of God and Savior of the World, and what he comes to give, salvation, deliverance, reconciliation, peace, eternally--yes, but also here and now. It really is amazing what you can see and who you can tell about Jesus if you just look around.

I

Our texts today are big...immense...dramatic...the Transfiguration of Jesus of Nazareth...the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. These texts direct our attention to profound

change taking place with the coming of light...the change that comes over Jesus as He ascends the mountain in the company of Peter, James and John. And there the veil is pulled back for a moment and these three see the really real. They experience Jesus as he really is in all his divine glory, his body and clothing shimmering in radiant white light, in the company of the two foremost representatives of the first covenant, Moses the Lawgiver and Elijah the Prophet, as they are confirming in Jesus' heart and soul the journey he is about to undertake to the cross for us all. And as if that were not enough, the voice of his Father comes over them all, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ...The change that comes over Jesus in the light.

Then the change that comes over one of the most notorious persecutors of the way of Jesus, Saul of Tarsus. He is on his way to a search-and-destroy mission in Damascus to try and round up any followers of this new Christian movement he can find and squelch them. Suddenly this notorious Jesus hater is knocked to the ground. A bright light from heaven explodes right there in front of him, blinding him as he is encountered by Jesus whose way he is seeking to shut down. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Still unable to see, he is led helplessly by the hand of his fellow-travelers to Damascus.

Flannery O'Connor once said of Paul, "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse." After three days in the darkness of the tomb, as it were, with no food or water, Saul is visited by a follower of the Way named Ananias of Damascus--Damascus the very place Saul was going to persecute Ananias, a man who himself might likely have been among those arrested and perhaps even executed by Saul.

Ananias receives a vision from the Lord to go and be the agent of healing and release to Saul, who himself that very moment is receiving a vision also that the Lord is about to send a man named Ananias to him who will lay his hands on him so he may regain his sight. The two visions converge as Ananias comes into the house of Judas on Straight Street in Damascus and greets him, "Brother Saul." Imagine that, he calls this hater of Jesus, "Brother." "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Immediately the heavy scales covering Saul's eyes crack off and he sees again, sees as he never saw before, sees in new Technicolor dimension, sees spiritual reality he had never before grasped...how that Jesus is truly the Lord. Later he will write, "If anyone is in Christ he or she is a new creation. Everything old has passed away; behold, everything has become new!"ⁱⁱ Saul, who will become Paul, is the prime example of such change. Then and there they immediately baptize him and feed him, perhaps the Eucharist. He receives the sacramental signs and symbols of his new life.

II

Big texts for a big day, Transfiguration Sunday, and for Unbinding Your Heart, beginning for us here at South Highland. We are starting today on a six-week journey into Unbinding Our Hearts and being released! We are today beginning an incredible

journey of faith discovery in which all of us are invited to participate and experience God at a new and deeper dimension. We are going to be journeying deeper in our encounter with God in Scripture and Prayer and discovering real authentic ways we can share faith with others, ways we can pass on this love of God so that others can come to the same sort of experience of being loved and cared for deeply by the God of the universe as we have. Over 300 people have agreed to be in a small group for six weeks. And you can still sign up for one after worship today! I hope you will!

Now this journey into prayer and faith sharing can be scary and a bit off-putting for us Presbyterian types. We are not too comfortable with the thought of faith sharing, to say nothing of if we use the official word, *evangelism*! For some it conjures up stereotypes of TV evangelists, high-pressure revivals, emotionalism, and intellectually vapid appeals. And often we have sort of just clammed up and let opportunities to meaningfully and authentically reach out with God's love and grace pass us by. Unwittingly we have only reinforced those stereotypes by our silence, by not sharing the faith that has touched us with some measure of meaning and hope and direction about this God who caringly and personally longs to be in relationship with all, with infinite love and grace.

III

As we begin this journey, I believe Ananias can help us. Ananias is everyman, simply an ordinary member of the community of Jesus in Damascus. He receives a message from the Lord and acts upon it. We know nothing more about him than that. Chapter 22 of Acts adds that he was devout. His name means "YHWH is gracious." We can sense his horror at the task he is given, going to this notorious destroyer of the saints, offering him healing and release. "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints."

Only two chapters earlier in Acts, Saul is described as a young man holding the coats of the rock throwers who stone Stephen to death. This Saul is a notorious schemer, too clever, too devious, to actually be throwing a stone himself. But then he does not have to. He is the mastermind. He has already instigated others to do the dirty work. And the narrator closes that tragic martyrdom story saying, "And Saul approved of their killing Stephen."ⁱⁱⁱ

Ananias, being asked to go to Saul, is like asking a Jew who had barely escaped the ovens of Dachau in the Holocaust, to go and take one of the German guards who held him captive in that camp out to dinner and a movie and maybe then a prayer meeting. Ananias is horrified. But Ananias goes. Ananias is available at the call of the Lord.

It is amazing what you can see and who you can tell if you just look around. If you are like me you can easily get accustomed to routine; the way you drive home from school or work, how you spend your Saturday, what TV shows you watch or don't, the familiar restaurants you eat in. We become creatures of habit, especially in our church life.

As we begin this journey of unbinding our hearts, I am asking you to consider some new routes, some new directions, some new ways of traveling. I am asking you to look around. Perhaps God is going to work in some new ways through you and through this Church. Who is there that needs the Lord? Who is there that needs a clean well-lighted place like this?

You see, the text does not say Ananias was a great communicator, a powerful healer, a wealthy big giver, an astute scholar...none of that. Ananias is simply available, a disciple whom the Lord encounters. Ananias makes himself available. He is your ordinary Joe or Cindy pew-sitter and he is told by God to go and open the eyes physically and spiritually of this brilliant, but notorious rabbi who is known to have done immense evil among the believers in Jerusalem. Ananias is cautious, fearful, but obedient as he hears God say, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel."^{iv}

IV

As I look back on my own life, I know I owe so much to the Ananiases who came alongside me and shared friendship and faith in real authentic ways. I think of Sunday School teachers like Robin Trimble, Frances Landers, and Bill Thompson who took time to be sure I really understood the stories of the Bible. I think of youth leaders like Ken Ford and Rocky Young who reached out to a somewhat geeky 7th grader then 11th grader and shared how Jesus Christ really loves me and cares for me--and has a band of followers, who included them, who accepted and welcomed me. I think of friends in college like Davis Kuykendall and Brad Wigor and Bruce Berger, and Tom Buck, and how God used their words and friendship and actions to make and deepen a divine connection with God.

Do you think faith is something everyone needs? I mean, at base level, do you think people live better, more open, honest, real lives when they have a spiritual root system of faith in God through Jesus Christ? Folks who share their faith think so. The book by Martha Grace Reese we will be using over these next six weeks in our small groups, states,

"A vivid relationship with God lies at the heart of real evangelism. People who share their faith love God and believe that other peoples' lives would be better if they were in a relationship with God too."^v

These powerful stories of Jesus' Transfiguration and Saul's Conversion present us with a dimension of that relational reality. Life is bigger and brighter and better than the dull flat black and white world we settle for too much of the time. There is more going on than you imagine! These texts show us the grace and love and power and glory of God who comes to us out of deep compassion, and they show us his heart in Jesus Christ his Son our Lord. This God wants everyone to live in relationship with Him.

This God meets us where we are and invites us to enter into the journey he has ahead for us. This God comes to us in whatever dark corner we find ourselves and brings us into his light, clean, well-lighted place. This God loves us deeply and cares for us personally. He equips ordinary people like Ananias and you and me to be his helpers, his catalysts. He comes to change us. Will you open yourself to the possibility that God just may fill you with faith and use you?

“I am one of those who likes to stay late at the café, with those who need a light for the night.”

John Wesley wrote these beautiful lines in what has become a great evangelical hymn of the Church:

“And can it be? He left his Father’s throne above, so free, so infinite his grace!
Emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam’s helpless race.
Tis mercy all! Immense and free! For, O my God, it found out me.

“Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray; I woke, the dungeon filled with light!
My chains fell off; my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

“Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my Lord, shouldst die for me.
Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my Lord, shouldst die for me.”

ⁱ Ernest Hemingway, The Short Stories, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” P. 382.

ⁱⁱ 2 Corinthians 5:17

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 8:1.

^{iv} Acts 9:15.

^v Martha Grace Reese, Unbinding Your Heart, p.4.