

**“Not a Whim, a Reason”**

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I wish I had a dollar for every time somebody said to me, “I cannot believe in God until I can see God with my own eyes.” Well, that argument just doesn’t quite hold up to me. I mean you can’t see gravity; but you know it exists. It has a profound effect on our lives. You can’t see magnetism; but you can see its result as you put it together when two metal objects can touch. You can’t see the past; but it has an immense impact on our lives. You can’t see radio waves. You can’t see sound waves or ultra violet waves and you can’t see the many vibrations on the spectrum. You can’t see wireless signals that help you get your internet signals; or your voice - you can’t see that through your phone calls. And, you can’t see the entire Universe, but you know it exists.

In our story of Adam and Eve, [they] were called to “till” and “keep” the ground in the paradise; that is the Garden of Eden. In Hebrew, the word to “till” - “*abad*” means to serve; and to “keep” in Hebrew is “*shamar*” which means to protect - to preserve. So when it says to “till” and “keep” in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were called to “protect” the garden, to “preserve” the garden, and to “serve” in the garden.

But they didn’t like serving. They didn’t like the job of protecting and preserving, so when Satan came in that Serpent and said to Eve, (because, let’s face it, this is one of the passages where the guys get off the hook. Not true.) [Laughter] But, the Serpent says to Eve, “Why can’t you eat of that apple? You will be able to see. You will be able to tell good from evil. You will be able to be like God, and why would you not want that?”

But when she ate of it, and gave it to Adam – (and realize, guys, we aren’t off the hook. We are just so dumb. We don’t think at all. We just do whatever we are told) - and he ate, and then they both could see; but now they didn’t like what they saw. Because instead of seeing all of the goodness and the love and the innocence that God had laid out for them in the Garden of Eden; when they saw good from evil, they saw themselves as dirty, as filthy, as naked and impure. It isn’t that *anything* changed. The garden was just the same. It’s just that *their* vision changed.

In doing what God did not want, their vision of themselves changed. Instead of seeing themselves as holy - loved by God in paradise - they looked at each other as somehow bad, wrong and dirty. We have been trying to see with the eyes of God ever since, and have had a very difficult time seeing each other and ourselves as worthy. That’s what happened in the Garden of Eden - and there wasn’t a dinosaur to be found anywhere in the story. [Laughter]

Like Adam and Eve, we feel that same sense of nakedness and vulnerability. We realize that we are truly vulnerable to everything the world has for us and, yet, we can’t see God all around us. We don’t feel the protection that God has for us, so we live lives that are scared and fearful.

But Jesus and many other religious figures, even the Buddha, talks about how we can see again, and how we can find that comfort and strength that we have lost somewhere in the

Garden of Eden. In fact Jesus and Buddha say with one voice: “Be awake, so that you can see again.” Jesus said, “If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be as light.”

Our spiritual disciplines provide us the opportunity of having light in our hearts again, so that we can see the Spirit of God around us, in us and through us; but it is very hard, because we live in a culture that is very difficult to see through. We are like in this trance - this cultural trance - that has scales over our eyes. And, just like Jesus healed the man who had the scales over his eyes – [Jesus] wiped off the mud, put ointment them, and the scales fell off and he could see it takes spiritual discipline to take the scales off of our eyes so we can see again too - because we are so distracted. We are so distracted by the video games that keep us hyper, by television that allows our frame of reference. Our ability to concentrate is down to eight minutes. Why eight minutes? Because eight minutes is the amount of time between one commercial and the next one. (So, half-way through this sermon I’m going to give you a commercial and then we will start again.) [Laughter]

That’s the level. And, teachers in school were frustrated for a long period of time wondering why kids couldn’t concentrate for the 50 minutes between one class period and the next - until they realized they needed to do it in eight minute blocks of time. Step away, do something else, and go back for another eight minutes. They could get their kids to concentrate then. When I say kids, I mean us. My generation started being raised in front of the television set. I’m as attuned to eight minutes as anyone young person today.

So how do we open our eyes and take the scales away and see God in our midst? I have no idea. So I turned to a few different friends of mine that I have never met, but I know them well through the books I have read. They become friends after a while.

One of my friends that I have read about and have never met, I have used before. His name is Richard Rohr. I will share another book by Richard Rohr today. It’s called “Everything Belongs.” He wrote this wonderful chapter about how you, through spiritual disciplines, begin to see.

Richard Rohr is a Roman Catholic. They seem to have such a grasp - especially their clergy and their brothers - on understanding how to find that spiritual discipline. He said, as we get older, the scales build on our eyes. They are built there by betrayal, hurt and disappointment. Year after year, problem after problem, the scales get stuck and we can’t see. It takes extra spiritual discipline for an older person to tear more and more of those scales of bitterness, sadness and betrayal off our eyes so that we can see with the Holy Spirit again.

He said once we tear those scales off, we can begin to see with the beginner’s mind. He said people don’t like to hear being called a “beginner,” because it feels like we don’t know what we are talking about. But, Father Rohr said, the greatest thing we can be is a beginner in the faith, because we always are starting over.

He said I, get so sick of the “born again” experience, as if it’s only done once.

Richard Rohr must have met my grandmother. I have told you that story before. My grandmother one time was asked, “What was the time you were born again? And she, who was as sharp as a tack, said, “This morning.” And the person looked at her and said,

“Really? What happened?” She said, “I was reborn this morning, and [I will be] tomorrow morning and the next morning, I’m reborn *every single morning*, because every day I sin. Every day I fall short of God’s glory, and thanks to the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ, I’m born again and that is wonderful.”

What she was saying - using Richard Rohr’s language - is that each new day I tear off the bitterness, the betrayal and the hurt, and the Holy Spirit allows me to be like a beginner.

Now we look at children as beginners, because they are just learning. But isn’t it interesting that, in the Gospels, every time the Apostles start getting haughty, they start getting proud and arrogant, Jesus parts out children. When Jesus said, “bring the little children unto me,” it was in a moment when the Apostles were bragging about which one of them was best. [Jesus] parts off the children and says, “Those of you who have the faith of a child will receive the Kingdom of Heaven.”

That is the beginner’s mind - to be able to experience God with joy and glee, without being tainted by the betrayals, the bitterness and the hurt. Richard Rohr is right. He said the minute your soul can say, “I don’t know anything,” then it is empty enough for the Holy Spirit to fill it each new morning; fill you again. And, if God’s Holy Spirit fills you, there is no room for bitterness; there is no room for hurt; there is no room for betrayal - and you can move forward with joy and glee, and without one ounce of bitterness in your heart. That is truly seeing [anew].

Now, Jesus is hard for us to understand in the West. Rohr said we in the West do not understand about spiritual discernment and, he said, we have to learn from our eastern brethren - the Buddha, Hindu and others. They seem to be more comfortable talking about spiritual things, even though we are the ones that believe in the triune God - with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He said Jesus was very, very spiritual and we, in our Western Church, need to learn to be spiritual in the same way.

They had *enlightenment*. Jesus called enlightenment the Kingdom of God. Buddha called it enlightenment. Buddhists and Hindus called it nirvana. Philosophers, I suppose, called it truth.

But enlightenment for the Christian is the reality that God is all around you. I love the phrase by St. Patrick: “God beneath you, God in front of you, God behind you, God above you, God within you.”

Right now and every moment, the moments you are sleeping and the moments you are awake, the moments you are at work and the moments you are at play, God is in you, around you, on top of you, below you and through you. But we can’t see it, because we have allowed the scales of bitterness, betrayal and hurt to blind us to the Spirit of God in our midst. The way we get beyond it is to embrace a relationship with God in prayer and in service, to “till and keep the ground, to serve God and to preserve the faith.” Just like Adam and Eve were called to do in the Garden, so we are trying to make paradise in this broken earth again. We do that, first, by nurturing our own garden in our hearts. We have to be strong in our prayer life. We need to be faithful and discerning, and thinking about and worshiping God, so we can take those scales off and be born again every single morning, to

be so filled with the Holy Spirit when we start our day, that nothing else has room to get in and distort our souls.

Then we need to till the ground around us. What that means, according to Richard Rohr, is we need to care and see the least of our brothers and sisters. We reach up in prayer, in taking off the scales, and that calls us to reach out. What a wonderful mission! Look up Look out. And, the minute we have looked up, and the scales are released, God has freed us to reach out into the world, to see those around us.

Our daughter is home again this weekend. She is home too often. [Laughter] She is cramping our style [Laughter] and we have this dog that you met last week. So we took him for a walk. We parked out on MLK, by the Hy-Vee before you get to Douglas. We went down the bike trail (sure enough we walked him across the bridge and down the hill). It was a beautiful day, so we had to hold him when the bikers went by. Then we were going down and we get to the overpass on Douglas (that is where I ride every day, and I know the Raileys do as well), and there is this older gentleman who lives under the bridge. I wake him up when I ride my bike by about 6:00 in the mornings, and I think, "Here are the least of these." Every morning I say a prayer as I am riding by that God will protect him, and that services will be available to care for him.

We, as a church and as individuals, need to see "the least of those" and reach out. Do we see the sick in our midst and respond? That is how we tear the scales away and fill our souls. Do we care about those on welfare and respond? Do we see the people who are gay, transgender in our midst and worry and are concerned about whether they have a place to go to the bathroom in a public facility? Do we see the immigrants and refugees?

Since we put that sign out front a couple of weeks ago, Lisa Anderson has had three different couples come to the church. [They're] not asking for money or food, but they don't know what to do, because their green card expired, and they lost their jobs, and it is \$600 a piece to get your green card renewed, and they don't even know how to go about it. If you are on food stamps - they didn't know this and I didn't either - you can get that waived and get your green card renewed, but where do you go and how do you go about doing it? If you are an immigrant, but you don't have all of the paper work, and you are not on food stamps, then you still have to pay.

We are kind of smart around here at the Church and we are kind of connected, but it was amazing how much work she [Lisa] had to go through to get these people to the right place, to get the right help, to get the service they need to get their green card renewed. That is what we are doing as a Church - to reach out to provide, in any way we can, so that others can have their hearts filled and have the bitterness, hurt and betrayal scaled away from their sight, so that they too can see God.

We have a lot of work to do to till the ground and keep it - to bring paradise back. But, I'm so proud of the work our Church is doing, that *you* are doing, and I pray that we will continue to do the hard, faithful work of looking up so that we can be filled each morning, have our scales removed, so that we can look out and see where a difference needs to be made, and have the faith and discipline and dedication to respond, in Jesus name.

Amen.