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Virtual Service of Worship

March 22, 2020

“Journeying with Jesus: Seeing with Spiritual Eyes”

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The Lower Brandywine Presbyterian Church Ministry Team
Virtual Service of Worship – March 22, 2020

Words of Greeting:

To all who may be viewing this first Virtual Service of Worship
from the Lower Brandywine Presbyterian Church:
Grace to you and peace,
from God the Father and Our Lord Jesus Christ!

Last week – as we gathered here in this Sanctuary for worship –
we heard the words of Jesus,
as recorded in John, Chapter Four. (4:21, 23)

He was speaking to a woman –
a Samaritan woman he had encountered at Jacob’s Well, in Samaria.

And – interestingly – he was speaking about places of worship:

“Jesus said to her,
‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming
when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain
nor in Jerusalem....

“But the hour is coming, and is now here,
when the true worshipers will worship the Father
in spirit and in truth,
for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.”

Later, the Apostle Paul would teach that each believer’s body is – indeed –
a temple of the Holy Spirit. (I Corinthians 6:19)

And so it is that – today – we can each worship in spirit and in truth,
wherever we may find ourselves!

Let us worship God!

It involved a nationwide scam –
in which some wealthy parents paid outrageous bribes
to get their children into prestigious universities –
like Yale and Stanford.

And – when all was said and done –
some fifty people were charged in the scandal,
including parents,
test administrators for the ACT and SAT,
and – even – college coaches.

It was found that they all had collaborated – in some way –
in getting unqualified students admitted to big-name schools.

Along the way, comedian Trevor Noah – from *The Daily Show* –
had one of the best jokes about this scandal:

“Some of these parents allegedly paid up to \$6.5 million,” he said.
“Which is insane.
Honestly, for that amount of money, just buy a smarter kid!”

Now – to be sure –
it is easy to make fun of people who seem to have many privileges.

Did they earn them?

Do they deserve them?

Or, are they just slackers – with more money than brains?

But – the fact is – like very coin, this one has two sides:

That is, we can say these things
because we obviously deserve all the blessings we have in our lives –
don't we?

We have worked for them.

We are good people.

And that earns us some good karma, right?

Well, the underlying reality is that we hold very tight
to this illusion of being a self-made man – or woman.

And, we get angry if people suggest that we benefit
from some unearned privilege.

But, let's change the direction of our thoughts for a minute.

Let's put ourselves in the blind man's place.....

What do you think would be the most difficult aspect of being born blind?

What would you miss out on?

What kind of help would you need?

And, how do you think other people would treat you?

With these thoughts in mind, listen again
to the opening words of this account from John's Gospel:

“As (Jesus) went along, he saw a man blind from birth.

And his disciples – then – responded to the occasion
by asking Jesus a question.....

Here, a brief sidebar is in order.....

Usually – when someone comes to Jesus with a question –
Jesus answers with another question,
with a parable,
or – even – by posing a challenge.

In fact, author Philip Yancey says he once heard a theologian say
that Jesus was asked 183 questions in the Bible.

And, Jesus answered only three of them directly.

Three out of one-hundred-eighty-three!

So – since this case is so special – we should sit up, and pay attention!

Indeed, the question that they asked is is one of the most important questions
of human existence.

And – as we noted – it is also one of the few instances
when Jesus actually answers a question directly.

“Why was this man born blind?”

In essence, the question concerns the issue of our earning our privileges,
and deserving our blessings.

Or – stated conversely –
of our being deserving of whatever difficulties life may present.

And – to be sure – this question has been around for a very long time!

Here, the foundational belief is that all of life
should be just, and happy, and under our control.

And – therefore – that injustice, and suffering, must have a root cause.

That is, injustice and suffering must be deserved in some way.

But if – as Jesus said – the blind man did not deserve his disability,
then we – on the other hand – do not deserve our abilities.

If he did not deserve his blindness,
then we do not deserve the blessings, and comfort, and safety,
and health, and happiness, that we experience.

And if none of us deserves our lot in life,
then none of us can boast – or complain –
if our lot in life changes.

So, whether we win – or whether we lose –
we do not deserve either outcome.

What – then – can we say about all of this???

Nancy Eiseland,
Associate Professor of Sociology of Religion at Emory University,
once shared her personal experience:

“Growing up with a disability,
I could not accept the traditional interpretations of disability –
the ones that I heard in prayers, in Sunday school, and in sermons:

‘You are special in God’s eyes’ – I was often told –
‘that’s why you were given this painful disability.’

Or, ‘Don’t worry about your suffering now –
in heaven you will be made whole.’

This – she says – confused me.

My disability had taught me who I am – and who God is.

What would it mean to be without this knowledge?

“My family [had] frequented faith healers, with me in tow.
[But] “I was never healed.

“People asked about my hidden sins.

“But they must have been so well hidden that even I misplaced them.

“The theology that I heard was inadequate to my experience.”

And, there is also the example of Fanny Crosby.....

When Fanny was six weeks old, she had an eye infection.

Her regular doctor was out of town,
and a man – posing as a doctor – gave her the wrong treatment.

And – within a few days – she was blind.

If that happened to many of us, I suspect that we would be very bitter.

And, we might well spend a lifetime feeling sorry for ourselves.

But Fanny was never bitter – and she never felt sorry for herself.

And – when she was only eight years old – she wrote this poem:

Oh, what a happy child I am,
Although I can not see.
I am resolved that in this world,
Contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't.
To weep and sigh because I'm blind,
I cannot and I won't!

So, instead of being bitter – and feeling sorry for herself –
Fanny Crosby used the gifts that God had given her:
She wrote over 8,000 hymns and poems,
to praise – and glorify – God.

The fact is that – sometimes – our ideas:
about what makes life worthwhile,
about what we “deserve,”
and about what constitutes a blessing from God,
can stand in the way of us understanding God,
and – then – living a life of real meaning and purpose.

Well, let's get back to our Gospel Passage –
and pick up with Jesus' answer to this vital question....

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned” – Jesus said –
“but this happened so that God's works might be revealed in him . . .”

And – after saying this – Jesus spat on the ground,
made some mud with the saliva,
and put it on the man's eyes.

“Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam.”

So the man went, and washed, and returned home seeing.

Here, we should that there are actually two acts of healing in these four verses!

There is, of course, the physical healing.

What a great joy and blessing this man received –
because he stepped out in faith:

He received his sight!

But, a case can be made that the first act of healing occurred
when the blind man heard Jesus say,
“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,
but this happened so that God's works
might be revealed in him . . .”

This statement – by Jesus – gave the man hope.

And, it healed his sense that his disability was somehow a curse;
that – in and of itself – it made him a lesser man.

Indeed, this hope is evidenced by the fact
that the blind man got up, and went to the pool of Siloam –
to wash the mud off his eyes.

Now, we don't know exactly where the blind man was when Jesus healed him.

But – as one commentator says –
“A trip to Siloam and back –
from the nearest wall of the temple –
would be about 1,300 yards.”

That is about 3/4 of a mile.

And – so – we might ask ourselves –
would we – being blind – walk even half that distance
on the word of a total stranger?

But, Jesus' words gave this man so much hope
that he was willing to take that risk!

A well-known professor – in the field of management –
shared a profound insight about suffering:

“There's some pain that needs a solution,
and there's some pain that needs a story.”

In this encounter,
Jesus gave the blind man both a solution – his physical healing,
and a story – that he was not disabled by some sin,
a sin that either he – or his parents –
had ostensibly committed.

And – today – it is especially important for us to live into this reality.

That is, most of us know what it is to carry around particular pains in life –
pains for which there is no immediate solution.

An unanswered prayer.
An undeserved burden.
The myriad adverse impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

We beg God for a solution.

But.....what if God gives us a story instead?

And – if God does so – the first essential characteristic of that story
would be that God can use every part of our lives for his glory.

But – on the other hand – it is possible for us to settle for a wimpy calling.

That is, we may be content to be just “good people” –
people who go to church,
and – occasionally – help our neighbor.

In that case – however – we are not fulfilling our potential:
To be a shining example of the love, the strength,
the power, and the grace of Almighty God.

And – if that is the case – part of the reason may be that
we hide our suffering, our questions, and our pains from each other.

We may think that our weaknesses make us less of a witness for Christ.

But, in reality, it is our walking in faith – through our pain –
that enables others to see God’s glory in our lives.

It was this same reality that informed Henri J. M. Nouwen’s book:
The Wounded Healer:

Nouwen proceeds to develop his approach to ministry
with an analysis of sufferings:
a suffering world....
a suffering generation....
a suffering person....
and a suffering care giver....

Nouwen contends that those who would serve
are called to recognize the sufferings of their times
in their own hearts.

And – then – to make that recognition the starting point of their service.

This – of course – involves being open to others,
as fellow human beings,
with the same wounds and suffering.

And this – in turn – reflects the example of Christ.

So it is that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes –
concerning Jesus:

(2:18)

“Because he himself was tested by what he suffered,
he is able to help those who are being tested.”

In other words,
we – too – are able to participate in the healing of others
because we, too, have been wounded.

And – we must remember –
God already knows all about us;
our “bad news,” as well as our “good.”

But, the really good news is that God can use all of our bad news.

The fact is that God is – most often –
glorified in the way we handle our suffering.

That is to say, our blessings do not draw people to God.

No one is in awe of a healthy, smart, wealthy person,
who achieves great things.

Rather, we are in awe of those who overcome hard times,
those who choose joy – in the face of sorrow,
those who choose love – in the face of betrayal, or hatred.

So it is that every blessing and every hardship,
every strength and every disability,
every joy and every sorrow experience
is an opportunity for God to be involved in our lives.

But, does that mean that God plans everything that happens to us?

No, I don't believe so.

There is – most certainly – suffering that comes from the sins of others.....
like abuse, or neglect, or divorce.

There is also suffering that comes from impersonal forces –
forces outside our control –
like dividing cancer cells, or drought, or recession,
or – as we speak – the coronavirus.

God did not intend for us to undergo this suffering.

But – on the other hand –
God does intend to accompany us through this suffering.

God desires to strengthen us,
and to enable us to demonstrate his power and love,
in any and all circumstances.

And – in this regard – we must remember that God –
Incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth –
underwent the most unjust suffering ever experienced:

The crucifixion of the only sinless person who ever lived!

The second essential characteristic of our story is that
we don't have to understand everything about God in order to live it out.

Rather, we are just to share what we do know about God.

When the formerly blind man is questioned –
by his neighbors, about his healing –
he says,
“The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes.”

And – a few verses later – the Pharisees interrogate the man harshly.

But this man turns this potentially-difficult time
into an opportunity to share the truth of Jesus.

Now, he still doesn’t know who Jesus is, or why Jesus healed him.

He does think that Jesus might be a prophet.

But – in any event – he didn’t let what he didn’t know
prevent him from sharing what he did know!

And – the next time the Pharisees interrogated him –
they accused Jesus of being a sinner.

And the formerly blind man said,
“Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know.
One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

Well – as the professor said –
“There’s some pain that needs a solution,
and some pain that needs a story.”

And – so – we may never get an answer to our “Why?”

May we – then – change the question to “How can God use this?”

God may not give us a reason;
but God will – most certainly – give us a purpose.

Friends, in this lifetime, we may never get a solution to our pain.

We may never experience healing.

And, we may never even see how God is using it.

But – if we give our pain to God – we can have a new story.

And, it will be the story of how God is glorified in our weakness –
not in our strength.

God will be glorified in our perseverance – more than our power.

God will be glorified more by our attitudes than – by our achievements.

And, God will use our pain to grow us into people
who both reflect His glory, and draw others to Him.

There is – of course – much more that could be said about this crucial topic.

But, we will draw these remarks to a close with these words –
this description of a new, emerging story.

It was penned by Brother Richard Hendrick of Ireland, just nine days ago:

Yes there is fear.
Yes there is isolation.
Yes there is panic buying.
Yes there is sickness.
Yes there is even death.

But,
They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise
You can hear the birds again.
They say that after just a few weeks of quiet
The sky is no longer thick with fumes
But blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi
People are singing to each other
across the empty squares,
keeping their windows open
so that those who are alone
may hear the sounds of family around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland
Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.
Today a young woman I know
is busy spreading fliers with her number
through the neighbourhood
So that the elders may have someone to call on.

Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques, and Temples
are preparing to welcome
and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary

All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting
All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way
All over the world people are waking up to a new reality
 To how big we really are.
 To how little control we really have.
 To what really matters.
 To Love.

So we pray and we remember that
Yes there is fear.
But there does not have to be hate.
Yes there is isolation.
But there does not have to be loneliness.
Yes there is panic buying.
But there does not have to be meanness.
Yes there is sickness.
But there does not have to be disease of the soul
Yes there is even death.
But there can always be a rebirth of love.

Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.
Today, breathe.
Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic
The birds are singing again

The sky is clearing,
Spring is coming,
And we are always encompassed by Love.
Open the windows of your soul
And though you may not be able
to touch across the empty square,
Sing."

And – perhaps above all else – see everything.....
absolutely everything, through spiritual eyes!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: *Amen.*

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Affirmation of Faith:

This morning – as an Affirmation of Faith –
I will read the Psalm for today: the 23rd Psalm

Listen intently to it, as if hearing it for the very first time.

And – in your heart – make it your own.....

The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
 he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil:
 for thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
 thou anointest my head with oil;
 my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer:

This morning's prayer is adapted from a prayer by Jill Duffield,
editor of The Presbyterian Outlook.

Jill posted her prayer on March 9th.

Great God of all that is – seen and unseen,
our anxiety rises as the invisible coronavirus spreads.
We worry about the impact of this illness on healthcare workers, older adults,
those already physically fragile, the vulnerable among us,
and people whose livelihoods are tied to the regular movement
of people and commerce.

We recognize – in this extraordinary moment –
how inextricably connected we are to one another.
And, we hope that this unmistakable realization will shape all our actions
in ways that foster the common good, increase compassion,
and expand communal care.

As people in positions of leadership in religious communities, educational institutions,
hospitals, government, and local communities face difficult choices –
about how to address the complex challenges this virus brings –
grant them wisdom and courage.

Knowing that we are flawed, and that our knowledge is incomplete,
make us humble in our judgment, patient with one another,
and gracious toward those tasked with the burden of making hard decisions –
despite the reality of continually-emerging information – in the days ahead.

Bring healing to the sick, strength to the caregivers, comfort to those who mourn,
peace to those in quarantine, and mercy to all of your beloved creation.

We ask this in the strong name of Jesus Christ our Lord,
by whose wounds we are being healed.

(I Peter 2:24b)

And hear us now, as we join our voices – wherever we are –
to pray the prayer that Jesus taught his first disciples:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.
Amen.

Charge and Benediction:

Friends, as Paul wrote to Timothy,
“God has not given us a spirit of fear,
but of power, and of love, and a sound mind.”

God will not always provide us a solution to the pains and problems of life.

But, God will always offer us a story – if we can “see” it,
the outcome of which will be far more than we can ask – or even think!

Let us receive the Lord’s Benediction.....