

**Sermon: March 20, 2022**

**“Cheap Confidence”**

**Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Ashcroft-Townsley**

**Scripture: Acts 9:1-9; Matthew 6:25-34**

When I was in Middle School, I remember watching the film *The Miracle Worker* about Helen Keller and her teacher, Annie Sullivan. For those who don't know, Helen Keller was a woman born in 1880 who lost her sight and hearing after an illness before she was two years old. Keller lived in a time when interventions to thrive with such disabilities would have been unheard of. People like Keller were thrown away, often sent to live in communities of like individuals, dismissed from society and often dismissed from their families. Keller's family, however, took another approach in hiring Annie Sullivan, who sought to teach Keller among other things how to communicate better and more broadly without the use of her sight or hearing. Keller and Sullivan's journey was not an easy one, as Keller's books years later would attest to.

In her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, on which *The Miracle Worker* is based, Keller recounts the moment things began clicking in her head while Sullivan tried to teach her the word for water. “I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, set it free. There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.”

While regaining her sight or hearing was beyond the scope of her abilities, there wasn't much else Helen could not do. She would go on to sweep away all of those barriers that kept her from living a full life in community with others. Her teacher would eventually become her lifelong companion as she went on to

experience things many of us can only dream of, all the while in the literal darkness of someone who has lost their sense of sight. When I first heard this story, I would not realize the relevance it would have for me just a few years later when at 14 years old, I, too, would become disabled with a debilitating disease that would take many things from me, too. Helen's story became, for me, a shining beacon of hope. If she could overcome the darkness of being "blind and deaf," then, I thought, even I could overcome the darkness of lupus.

The difference, however, between Helen Keller and I is that her darkness was a literal darkness, while mine was much more figurative. This literal darkness would be something like what Saul—who we come to know as the Apostle Paul—experienced on the road to Damascus. Keller's darkness, however, couldn't be healed by Ananias after 3 days, but would stay with her for her whole life. It's fair to say that Paul would describe those three days as dark, but it's hard for those of us who are sighted to know what "darkness" means to someone who is blind.

Today, we continue our worship series, "Lunar Faith," with Barbara Brown Taylor's wonderful book *Learning to Walk in the Dark* as our guide. In her chapter, "The Eyes of the Blind," Taylor discusses the ways in which scripture "equates blindness with spiritual failure" (92). In Mark 8, after he feeds the 4,000, Jesus sits down with the disciples, who again aren't understanding his teaching, and he says, "Do you have eyes but cannot see?" Jesus is saying their eyes cannot help them see the point he's trying to make. Taylor points out the ways in which we use terms like "shortsighted" or "lacking vision" to describe people who are "aimless or idle" (92). These metaphors mean something to us who can see because we are so dependent on our own senses of sight. Our sight gives us a kind of confidence that we are perceiving things clearly because they're right in front of us, easy for us to see. But this kind of confidence can be deceiving.

If you are able, try to look at the pew in front of you. You think you know this item because you have seen it every Sunday for the last however many years. You know what color it is. It's general thickness. You might even know what kind of tree it's made from and what its purpose is. Having even glanced at it Sunday after Sunday, you might think you know it quite well. You could describe it to me generally without even being in the room.

Now, close your eyes and put your hands out to touch the pew if you can reach it. Feel the texture of the tree the pew is made from, the contours of the it, where it dips in and curves out. As you make your way down the pew, you might feel the places where another piece of wood has been attached, the gap that's between the two pieces might not have been evident with your eyes, but with your hands, you feel things your eyes cannot possibly pick up on. You might feel little knicks in the surface where the pew has taken on wear and tear over the years since it was put in this church—there's a story behind each of those knicks and dents. By the time you get to the legs of the pew, you will have learned things about that pew that you never would have imagined by only experiencing it with your eyes.

We who are sighted have confidence that our eyes, even with a glance, are telling us the story, perhaps we're confident enough to think they're telling us the whole story—but this is a cheap confidence. It's the confidence of a young man all suited up and headed into his first day at a new job who has no idea that college didn't really prepare him for all he's about to face that day. It's the kind of confidence that does not have the content to back it up. Seeing in this way makes us blind, really, to the whole picture. It keeps the deeper, richer light of understanding from dawning on us. That deeper, richer understanding involves the kind of seeing that can only be done when we have to really stop, take our time, and pay attention.

Thinking this deeply about the pew in front of us may not be on our list of vital spiritual insights, but if it isn't, perhaps we're missing something in our spiritual lives. The truth is, as Taylor points out in her book and as I learned countless times in my exploration of world religions, "every major spiritual tradition in the world has something significant to say about the importance of paying attention" (106). In our gospel passage today, Jesus gives us one of those moments we thirst for when we need comfort from our faith. He says, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." He tells us that life is more than these things. But Jesus says something more than that in this passage. "Look at the birds of the air... consider the lilies of the field..." In other words: pay attention. He's saying pay attention to what's happening in the wider world around you. He turns the disciples and us toward the greater things of the Kin-dom of God. He exhorts them and us, "Pay attention to the *things that matter.*"

Two month ago, Vietnamese Buddhist monk, peace activist, prolific spiritual writer, and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh passed away. He was a pioneer in the teachings of mindfulness and his words constantly call us back to the vital spiritual practice of paying attention. In his book, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Mindfulness*, he wrote, "People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child—our own two eyes. All is a miracle." Thich calls us back to truly paying attention to those things we only glance at. We think we've seen the blue sky, the white clouds, the green leaves, and the eyes of a child—but we haven't. We've only glanced at them. We know them with the kind of cheap confidence we get fooled into as we look at things in the course of our everyday lives.

In the darkness of her sight impairment, Helen Keller saw the light of understanding come on as she understood, finally, the connection between the words being spelled in her hand and the objects she was interacting with. It was the kind of seeing that could only happen in the dark. Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that if we were actually paying attention, we'd experience a world of miracles right under our noses—a world that is wholly different than the world as we know it. When the Psalms or other scriptures speak to us of the beauty of the world around us, it's not just pretty words. It's to remind us to look around, pay attention. Stop and smell the roses... sometimes literally.

How much different would our lives be if we really, truly paid attention? When I pray, I usually leave time for some silence. It's something I learned early on when giving public prayer. People value the permission to take their prayers to God, but they don't always need your words. Long ago, I had a pastor who said, "Long sermons put people to sleep, long prayers put God to sleep." I don't think that's necessarily true, though I try to keep my sermons at around 15 minutes, I never know how the Spirit is going to move. But God isn't bored by our prayers. God isn't put to sleep when we draw nearer in a state of prayerfulness and mindfulness. The problem isn't that God's uncomfortable with our prayers or the silences, it's that, we are. We are uncomfortable with silence, with stillness, and yet we are told in scripture to be still. Be still and know, Psalm 46 tells us. God calls us to stillness, to quiet. Jesus drew away by himself quite frequently as he sought that stillness.

If we are still, we might find that we are able to put aside our previously held assumptions about what we see and awaken to a world that will change everything for us and for others. It's like listening deeply to someone we don't know whose views are different than ours: we don't do this because to listen deeply to another, we have to see them as a person and as worth our consideration. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, "For things to reveal themselves to us, we

need to be ready to abandon our views about them.” If Helen Keller can do that as she lived in the literal darkness and silence that surrounded her as a child, surely we can, too.

So let us abandon the cheap confidence of glancing at the world around us and thinking we know it all. Let us instead embrace the kind of seeing that is only possible in the dark, a faith that calls on us to remember that the celestial brightness of God is as brilliantly visible in the dark as it is in the light, if only we pay attention long enough to see it. Amen.