



Rev. Bill Roth
Psalm 146, Galatians 1:11-24
June 13, 2010

Opening prayer: Gracious One, may we honor the freedom you have given each of us, by refusing to judge those who are different from us. Amen (*from Prayers for Freedom*).

My mother used to say getting old isn't for sissies. And I have to tell you that I am not particularly impressed with the aging progress either. With each passing day, I feel increasingly stiff and sore as I stumble out of bed in the mornings. This is especially true if I happened to have played a couple games of racquetball the day before.

Furthermore, when I look in the mirror as I am brushing my teeth, the receding hair line that grows with each passing year does not exactly thrill me either.

But as much as I hate the creaking joints and loss of my hair, I despise the idea of having to hunt up a pair of reading glasses just so I can read the morning paper with my first cup of tea.

In fact, one of you teasingly note that I did not have these when I came here 11 years ago – to which I quip that perhaps working for the church was causing me to go blind.

Most days...most days, I doubt the logic of that statement, but the fact of the matter remains that without the aid of these corrective lenses, my reading ability is quite limited.

Living in denial of this fact, I attend plays and I can't read the programs, I go to restaurants and can't decipher the menu, I travel to ballgames and I can't see the rosters. Not being able to see accurately can cause us problems both big and small. We need only remember the news stories of a week and a half ago from the world of sports to make our point. In case you somehow missed what I am referring to, let me refresh your memory.

A week ago Wednesday evening, I was sitting on the couch when my son came down stairs carrying his Mac and informed me that our beloved Detroit Tigers were in the 7th inning and the Tiger pitcher was throwing a perfect game. For the uninformed persons in the room, a perfect game is when a pitcher faces the minimum batters in a game, which is 27, or three outs per inning times nine innings for 27 batters. It means no one reaches base on a walk, hit or an error. There have been 20 of them in the history of baseball, so as you can see, they are as rare as hen's teeth. In the long history of the Detroit franchise, there have been more than 160,000 games and there has never been a Detroit pitcher who has thrown a perfect game. None!

Now being long-suffering Tiger fans, my son and I have learned that we have to grab for glory and success at every singular opportunity, so we set the computer on the coffee table and watched with nervous anticipation as Armando Galarraga made his way into the ninth inning with his perfect game intact.

After a great defensive play in center field by Austin Jackson and a routine grounder to shortstop Ramón Santiago, all that separated Galarraga from immortality in the annals of baseball was the 27th out of the game. Giddy with anticipation, I summoned my daughter down from upstairs and tried to explain to her that missing this was like missing the Apollo moon landing or the Berlin wall coming down. Clearly she was not buying my interpretation of the historical significance of the event, but she politely watched the game, partly out of curiosity and partly so she would not have to continue packing for the wedding trip to Memphis in the morning.

We all crowded around the computer as we watched what we hoped would be the final batter, the No. 9 hitter, stepping up to the plate. We could not believe it. Tiger history and glory was unfolding right before our eyes. The batter swung and tapped a weak grounder to the right of the infield. The first baseman ranged to his right, fielded the ball cleanly and threw to the pitcher covering first base, beating the runner by a half step. We erupted in momentary ecstasy, jumping with joy over the final out and a perfect game.

But our joy was short. We watched with shock and disbelief as we saw first base umpire Jim Joyce signal the batter safe, touching off a shock wave in our living room, across the field and the stadium and, not to be dramatic, but throughout our nation. Television stations that had cut in to witness the historical event replayed the blown call over and over again to the stunned amazement of people everywhere. What was not a particularly difficult call at first had been missed and missed badly. The umpire had not seen what everyone else had seen.

After the next batter grounded to the third baseman for the game's final out, there were a few brief but choice words between manager Jim Leyland and the umpire Joyce as the players left the field. Immediately after the game, Joyce went into the clubhouse to review the play and, then and only then, to his shock and utter horror, he saw what the whole world had seen moments before. The ball had clearly beaten the runner by a half step. Thus, a skilled and veteran umpire of more than 20 years had done the unthinkable...he missed a routine call as the world was watching and thus robbed a young journeyman pitcher of his rightful place in history.

But luckily, the story does not end there.

Beside himself with remorse, Joyce sought Galarraga out immediately after he saw the replay and apologized to him for his costly mistake. Even more amazing and unfortunately rare in today's world, was the calm and grace-filled reaction of Armando Galarraga who accepted the apology and hugged Joyce and then defended him to the press.

Asked about the play by reporters, Galarraga simply stated that no one is perfect and that the umpire had been a man and apologized and that he knew how badly the umpire must feel.

For me, this story ends the next day when the Tigers play Cleveland once again and Joyce returned to the ballpark to umpire the game from behind the plate. The fans gave a mostly positive reaction to Joyce's introduction, and the Detroit manager Jim Leyland sent Galarraga to home plate to turn in the day's lineup card to Joyce. The reunion was very emotional. With Joyce

wiping tears from his eyes, he gave Galarraga a gentle tap on the shoulder as the fan cheered the heroic acts of repentance and grace they had just witnessed.

So what do you say? Just another cheap sports analogy from the pulpit? Perhaps. But Jim Joyce did not see what was right in front of him and it cost him and another man significantly and while many of us (myself included) were quick to vilify him, I can't help but wonder if this is not our story, too?

Maybe we shouldn't be so quick to cast stones.

Today's Scripture is yet another story about someone failing to see correctly what is right in front of them. In today's text, Jesus is eating at Simon's home when a woman of poor reputation comes and washes Jesus feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair and anoints them with perfume.

Simon the Pharisees cannot believe what he is seeing! If Jesus is really a wise and holy man, then he should know of this woman's loose reputation and he would not tolerate her touching him. Jesus read the body language of the crowd and he knows what is going on. So he tells a story of grace and forgiveness and then finally addresses Simon with these words, "Do you see this woman?"

The answer is clear – on one level. Sure he see her. She is a woman of poor reputation from the city. He sees that. Anyone can see that. But the question Jesus is asking goes much deep than the surface. He is asking, "Do you see a child of God when you look at this woman?"

Too often we think we know someone based on their appearance or background. We look first at their race, their physical attractiveness, their hair style and clothes. Then we examine the schools they attended, what neighborhood they live in, what part of the country their family calls home. From these surface observations, we form our decision as to whether they're capable of performing the task at hand, whether they're suited to our needs, whether they're worthy of our time and attention. Are they one of us or are they "*other*?" But the question Jesus is asking is, Can we see beyond the superficial? Do we really see the other person as a child of God?

In my reading of Scriptures, it seems that God is continually asking us to look at things in a different way, or in a different light. It is as if he is asking us to look at things through a new and different lens. I think the value of Scripture and the purpose of Jesus' ministry is very simple.. They are like corrective lens that enable us to see things clearly.

Without the corrective lens of Scripture, we are going to missing a lot of "calls" if you will. Without the words of Jesus, who asks us, "Do you see this woman?", we will fail to see our neighbor and ourselves as children of God.

What I love about the Bible is how when we think we know what we're seeing, when we think we have made the "right call," Jesus comes and long and says, "Oh really? Do you really see this woman?"

This is why time and again throughout the Bible, God picks the most unlikely person to do ministry. God chooses people we would look over to do his will and purpose. People with names like George, Shane, Kevin, Ellen, Barbara, James and Bill are called not because they are perfect but because Jesus looks at us with the lenses of grace and compassion...

Today's passage is clear. Our charge is to look deeper, to see beyond outward appearances and to value all those who pass before us, and to do so we need corrective lens – the same glasses that God uses when he looks at us.

And this only happens when our hearts are open to God. It comes to pass when God lets us get a glimpse of how he looks at people. Notice that through the eyes of God, what define us is not our height, our lineage nor our accomplishments, no matter how near perfect they might be. What defines us is the way God looks at us – he looks at us with the lens of compassion, and he invites us to see our neighbor with the same glasses

Gandhi reminds us of this when he said, "If you don't find God in the very next person you meet, it is a waste of time looking for him further."

So Jesus asked Simon the Pharisee, "Do you see this woman"...He's saying do not treat her as a non-person because of her sin. Anyone can do that. Jesus is asking, "Do you see the image and likeness of God in her?"

For the Christian, The Bible is busy creating a new world. John Calvin called Scripture the "lens" through which Christians view the world. As with a pair of glasses, the lens of the Bible brings into focus things we had not noticed before. Other things that once were special to us fade out of focus.

Jesus was forever taking things that the world considered inconsequential – a widow's coin, a lost sheep, a lost boy – and forcing us to see these seemingly small and unimportant things as God sees them: As cherished, beloved creatures of the Creator.

As some of you know, I have a significant learning disability with languages, spelling and writing. It has been a struggle all my life to write, and thus four years of high school and three years of college and another three of seminary were in some ways an act of supreme will and a triumph for me.

But along the way, I have been fascinated and at times utterly dismayed by the supposed brightest among us who have made their way to teach at our college and seminary campuses. Many of these alleged bright persons have no clue about learning disabilities and different kinds of intelligence. In their mind, if you can't spell you can't be smart. If you can't write well, you can't be smart. It is interesting that many people in school thought I was ignorant due to my learning disability, which is an interesting word, isn't it? Ignorance means we ignore something, which is what many of my professors did. They ignored the fact that writing and spelling are poor predictors of intelligence.

Thus in seminary and college, many professors would look at my papers with poor spelling and grammatical errors and assign a grade based on the paper's appearance and their assumptions and prejudice about my intelligence. They ignored what I was trying to say albeit in a flawed way.

So when I did a 30-page paper on a chapter of the Book of Revelation, naturally I would transpose the chapter numbers and the professor would scold me about carelessness and would start my paper as "B" and then begin to grade down from there assuming the paper was a last-minute effort or without much thought.

What he did not know and never imagined was that it was done weeks early with great strain and effort. It was then taken to Duke Hospital to a secretary there who I paid to type and try to edit my work. She would struggle gallantly to type my paper and correct my spelling and syntax. I could not pay her what she was worth, for without her efforts there would have not been a paper and thus no degree. Many times I would sit outside her door waiting as she would struggle to read my handwriting and understand my sentence structure, doing her best to make it presentable.

In class, tests were difficult due to a lack of fine motor skills and poor spelling especially with time limits. Many "learned" professors would take one look at my writing and simply dismiss my work as sloppy and uncaring and not worthy of their precious time to read for content.

What I do remember were the select few, people like Dr. Fry or Dr. Chaney, or my favorite professor Dr. William Hasker who would actually make the effort to read my papers or my handwritten exams with an open mind. I will never forget the day Dr. Hasker returned our finals and congratulated me in front of the whole auditorium with a gentle smile and warm voice, that I had the best grasp on the material but the least ability to express it in a written form.

Because he gave me an "A," but more importantly because he looked at me with the corrective lens of grace and compassion, I quickly signed up for another courses of his, One on Wittgenstein's philosophy, a class in which I was not particularly interested, but I could not help myself.

For he knew my secret. He guessed what I had known since I had taken the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in the sixth grade – that I was reading on a sophomore-in-college level but that my spelling grammar was near the third-grade level. To Dr. Hasker, I was not dumb lazy, uncaring. My brain simply did not work and would never work the same others did in the areas of spelling and writing.

I loved the way profess Hasker looked at me. It was as if he looked at me through a different lens, as though he looked at me though the lens of Christ's grace and love.

It was his way of looking and seeing me with the corrective lens of God that way made all the difference and allowed me see myself as he did.

So enough about me. Let's get back to the text and the very difficult question I must ask you now: What do you see when you look at a flawed person standing in front of you? Maybe that person is in your home. Or they may be at the work place or perhaps you see them when you look in the mirror. The question is, Do you see person Jesus sees or do you just see imperfection?

I hate getting up in the morning and putting on my glasses, but it is the only way I can see things clearly. Often times, I hate putting on the corrective lens of Jesus Christ but it is the only way I can see other accurately. And oh what a difference it makes when I look at others through the lens of Christ, and oh what pain I cause when we fail to see the image of God in others.

Maybe what we all need are Jesus glasses, glasses that we put on every the morning. Glasses that let us see like Jesus does, spectacles with lenses made of compassion and grace. Can't you just see it. We could sell Jesus glasses in the gift shop and when someone put them on, they would be able to see really see, to see the image of Christ in others.

Frederick Buechner in *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* says, "If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors. With our imagination as well as our eyes, that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces but the life behind and within their faces. Here it is love that is the frame we see them in."

As Christians, our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy.

Armando Galarraga saw a flawed human being in Jim Joyce, but more than that he saw an opportunity for uncommon grace and forgiveness, even in the face of his tremendous personal loss.

What we see in a situation or in another person depends on how we look, and it is Jesus who gives to us the lenses we need to look at the world. Would that we all had "Jesus glasses" to see each other through the two lenses of love and grace.

So hear the God news one more time today: as I read the words of Renée Miller

"We need never worry that we don't measure up. We can walk with assurance before God, because we, too, are 'the one.' Not because we're better than anyone else, but because God has peered lovingly into our heart and seen there what we are made for."

You know, with a miraculous healing touch, Christ enabled blind people to see what they had not been able to see before. Perhaps He still does. Perhaps He still does. In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.