

## Seeing Clearly Mark 8:22-26

In the weeks leading up to Jesus going to the cross, He and the disciples took a series of trips. They went back and forth across the Sea of Galilee and then up to the far north of Israel into the mountains—all before they journeyed back down south the hundred miles or so to Jerusalem where He died for the sins of the world.

And along the way Jesus fed 4,000 people with only seven loaves of bread and a few small fish, He got into debates with a fundamentalist religious sect known as the Pharisees, he rebuked the disciples for worrying that they didn't bring enough bread on their trip. It was standard stuff for God's only Son and His twelve students.

But Jesus also healed an unnamed blind man by spitting on His eyes, laying hands on him twice and then charging him not to tell anybody about it.

Jesus met the blind man in the city of Bethsaida which was on the north side of the Sea of Galilee along the Jordan River, near the point where the Jordan flows into Galilee. They were just passing through on their way north when some people led the blind man by the hand right to Jesus, begging Him to just touch the blind man. And what happened next is healing unlike any other in the New Testament. The Gospel writer Mark tells us:

**He (Jesus) took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?"**

### Mark 8:23

Jesus spit on the man's eyes. To this, if I was the man, I might just say, "Hey Jesus, could have just say a few words or wave your arms around or put a hand on my head or something?"

Instead, Jesus spit on him.

That's not what you would expect.

The ancient Church fathers said that Jesus spitting on the man's eyes was meant to represent baptism. Jesus was making the man spiritually clean and washing away His sin. The Church father Ambrose said this was like the opening the eyes of the spiritually blind, by which **"the blind in heart begin to see the light."**

After He spit on Him, Jesus then laid His hands on the man and asked, "Do you see anything?"

And this unnamed man did see something. For the first time in years maybe his entire his life, light entered his eyes. The receptacles in his brain processed an image but it was blurry.

**And he looked up and said, "I see people, but they look like trees, walking."**

### Mark 8:24

Jesus immediately laid hands on Him again. And everything was made right.

**Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.**

#### **Mark 8:25**

Jesus touched Him again and gave him 20/20 vision. Amazingly, the first time Jesus touched him, he took the man from living in perpetual darkness to seeing light. The next time Jesus touched him, He basically performed Lasik surgery.

Why did Jesus heal this way? Why not just touch him once and get it over with? We know He could. We know Jesus even healed people who were miles and miles away just by speaking the word.

What gives?

Sometimes, Jesus best work is when He chooses to leave something incomplete.

He does something great, amazing, astounding but unfinished. If we follow Jesus, we live most of our life between His two touches--the promise of our baptism, what He has done, and the vision of what we know we are intended to be. We are filled with hope because of the good work Jesus started in bringing us from darkness to light but we struggle and strive and yearn because once we see the light, like looking through a glass dimly, we want to see clearly, we want to see things perfectly, we want to experience the fullness of what Jesus has for us, we want to see His plan and experience His presence and power and grace just like we are looking God right in the face.

To follow Jesus means to hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice, to yearn to see things be the way they are supposed to be. When we are no longer blind, groping around in the dark, we want to have 20/20 vision

And it usually doesn't come at once. But we can trust this promise:

**And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.**

#### **1 Corinthians 1:6**

We live most of our lives waiting for Jesus to finish the good work He has started and we struggle desperately when our daily life doesn't match our dreams.

But we trust Jesus touch to come again and finish the good work He started.

During the last 18 months of pandemic, cultural upheaval, strife, and dizzying change one of the questions I get the most is "What's it like being a pastor?" "And they usually follow it up by saying, "This has to be the most difficult time to be a pastor in the history of the Church."

Well...the pastors thrown into the Roman arena to fight lions might disagree and there are plenty of pastors who died in jail cells under fascists and communists and kings and queens. And I don't think I would care much for being a circuit rider on the back of a horse going from town to town camping out every night, cooking fatback and cornbread over a fire. There are plenty of pastors around the world today who don't know where their next meal is

coming from or who live under threat of the police kicking in their doors and hauling them away.

So I disagree.

Actually, this is a great time to be a pastor. It is an exciting time because as a people we are little bit hungry, we are dissatisfied, we are waiting for Jesus to finish the good work He started.

Reaching a people who have everything going for them, who been blessed with absolute abundance can be a challenge. **Hosea 13:6** put it like this:

**But when they had grazed, they became full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore they forgot me.**

People aren't satisfied today. We're not as full or as optimistic as we used to be. In fact, I don't really know anyone who believes things are going well. And that's why it's a great time to be a pastor and a great time for Churches that are willing to seize the moment, recognize that Jesus' work is not yet complete in them, and boldly show a world in desperate need of good news that Jesus is not done with them yet.

Part of the reason for this congregational meeting today and New Life Weekend next weekend is our desire to reset and even-relaunch First Pres following COVID. I know we are still dealing with COVID of course and that its still very real for a lot of people but I don't think we can wait any longer—and not because I am concerned about our future as a church. I am not. Like I said this is a great time to be a pastor and I have never been encouraged about the future of any church as I am about ours right now.

No, it's not First Pres who cannot wait.

It's the world who cannot wait.

This world is eating itself alive and it needs the Gospel. I don't need to tell you that. The world believes it is wise but does not fear God and we know, from Scripture that is a logical impossibility. It is blind, lost in sin. Indeed, the world around us doesn't know how blind it is. Helen Keller said, "The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision."

Well...we have a vision.

Our vision statement is "New life, through Jesus, for Edmond and the world." And yes, we chose it, in part, to give us some focus—to be a picture of the change we seek in the world around us. But we also chose because it is a pithy statement of an imperative, a necessity, something that must come to pass and indeed that Jesus is already doing. You see the world, our neighborhood, Edmond, Oklahoma, the United States thinks, believes it can be saved, transformed made new through good ideas, good works, good government, science, economics, financial opportunity and the like. And it cannot.

It needs Jesus to lay hands on it. And that's what He calls His church to do. If we don't do it, I don't know who will.

And First Presbyterian Church is very well positioned, following a difficult 18 months to be to be the hands that Jesus lays on a blind world.

Let me tell you why.

We are better church today than we were 18 months ago. One of the other questions I often get from people, church members, and others too is “How’s the Church doing?” And I usually say, “I think things are going great!”

Now, like every other church I know, we don’t have as many people here on Sundays as we did pre-COVID. We are probably about 3/5 to 2/3 on Sunday attendance in person. We have people joining us on-line too, about 70 or 80 every week. We have lost a few people through COVID and without a doubt some folks attendance pattern has changed. They are going to church less often than they were two years ago. By the way, if you miss seeing someone here, let them know. Call, e-mail, text, knock on their door—let them know they’ve been missed.

At the same time, we are seeing a lot of new folks. And they are thrilled to be here. Every week I talk with several people who are new and they are excited about what they see Jesus doing at First Pres. Our reach remains strong and even grew during COVID. God’s faithfulness and your trust allowing us to invest significantly in livestream months before the lockdown, proved critical.

Let me also mention, and you’ll hear more about this if you stay for our meeting a in few minutes, our financial health is good. Thank you for continuing to be financially generous through a tough time. For the last year and a half we have not been constrained by finances at all and we have even been able to move some projects ahead that were long-standing needs. Thank you for continuing to give.

Let me also say, we have great leaders here. Your elders and deacons, the people who teach Sunday School and lead small groups are phenomenal disciples of Jesus Christ. They love God, trust His Word and they love God’s people. We also have a great staff and we have made some phenomenal hires in the last year and a half and over the five years I have been here. The staff works hard. They are creative. They love Jesus. They want to serve you. They are committed to our vision and we have a great time together.

We also have a great congregation. You are faithful. You love God. You love your neighbor. You are resilient. You are generous. You trust your leaders and your pray for us.

But that’s not the main reason I believe we are as healthy and strong as any time since I have been here, doing some great Kingdom work and we are being readied for more.

We have unity.

When I say unity, I don’t mean the surface deep unity around an idea of a cause or an individual that we are often browbeat and shamed to adopt. No, what I mean is really specific kind of unity, a unity that the Bible promises is power-packed, potent, persuasive and preeminent—unity in Christ. Unity in Christ and unity with Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is the key to being a vessel for the Kingdom. Jesus said as much when He prayed to the Father the night before He went to the cross, “...that they may be one even as we are one. I in them and you in me and that the world may know that you sent me and love them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:22-23).

When the early Church gathered after Jesus’s resurrection and ascension, there was just about 120 people—about the number of people at a junior high basketball game. They were harassed, scared, and they had just lost their leader. But we know this about them—they were one. We are told “all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer.”

(Acts 1:14). Within a few days the Holy Spirit was poured out and soon they were filled with otherworldly boldness, eloquence and cosmos-bending power. Unity in Christ is so important that the man who founded more churches than any other person in the Bible, Paul, plead for it constantly:

**I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.**

#### **Ephesians 4:1-6**

By the way, unity in Christ does not mean there is no room for dissent or discussion or debate. We should cherish dialogue because dialogue makes us think and clarifies what we believe. It's a good thing. Unity in Christ does mean when we disagree we do it in love and face to face, person to person, not behind closed doors and not with rumor or attacking people to discredit ideas. In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty and in all things charity.

We want to seize this moment because I believe Jesus had laid His hands on First Pres and has given us a clear vision and a plan for carrying it out. That's why we want you at New Life Weekend in five days. We want to share that plan with you, we want you to be a part of it. What we are going to say is we want to have a great welcome—here at First Pres, on-line and in our community. We want to make ourselves indispensable to Edmond. We want to practice what one of our speakers next weekend calls 'radical hospitality.' Second, we want to have easy to find and ample opportunities for great smaller communities where people can live out our seven core practices—be it Sunday School, small groups, Bible studies or micro-groups. We want have a clear next step for someone who is captivated by our community. And then third, we want to have a clear pathway to grow you as leaders as people who are creating Christ-centered, Holy Spirit-filled community. We want to empower great leaders like you to make disciples and create our great welcome and great smaller communities.

Again, like nearly every church I know, we are a little smaller than we were 18 months ago—so we need all hands-on deck. We need you be a part. To lead a micro-group with your neighbors or co-workers. To be in a small group. To serve community through one of our community partners. To invest in someone and be the vessel by which the Holy Spirit changes their life or even be part of our hospitality ministry so we can give our guests the very best, Holy Spirit-filled welcome of any Church in Edmond. Will you join us for just a few hours next Friday and Saturday, so you can be a big part of what Jesus is doing here?

Now, the second reason I am so excited about First Pres, believe our best days are ahead, and am convicted that God is doing something amazing in our midst—is that He is calling First Pres out.

By calling out, I mean that the Holy Spirit is forming in us a Kingdom mentality. And God uses Churches that have a Kingdom mentality. The sky is the limit for Churches with a Kingdom mentality. And we see this mentality in how Jesus healed the blind man as well.

Jesus wanted to keep His healing a secret. Jesus took the man by the hand and led him outside of the village of Bethsaida, where no one could see the man healed. And then

when the man was healed Jesus sent him back home and gave him strict instructions not to go back into the village where He could be seen, um....seeing.

Shockingly, Jesus didn't want anyone to know about this healing.

This is probably not how we would choose to do things. If Jesus healed us from blindness or made us walk or even gave me hair, I am guaranteeing that I am going to put that all over Facebook. I am absolutely going to tweet that out. But Jesus said the blind man He healed, "Go straight home and don't even go near the town."

Why?

The popular theology around Jesus after all is that He healed people to draw attention to His ministry, to create a buzz, to prove to people that He is God.

Untrue. Jesus didn't care about numbers. In fact, when the numbers got too big, Jesus usually did something controversial to thin the herd, so to speak. Again, after the greatest miracle of all, His resurrection, Jesus followers wouldn't have filled our Great Hall.

Jesus didn't heal people to draw crowds. He healed people because He was compelled to share the Kingdom of God and when the Kingdom of God is poured out, evil things die—including sickness and disease.

And when He sent this man given new sight back home to hide in his living room—telling him don't pass go, don't collect \$200. And Jesus did it for Kingdom reasons. It was not His time yet. His time was coming. And Jesus was so filled with a Kingdom mentality and His Father's will, He did the opposite of what seemed obvious and chose the unexpected, shocking, the road not taken—turning common sense upon its head.

And that's what we need to do and that's what we need to do.

And friends, I think that kind of thing is our DNA as a Church. When we have been at our best, that is who we have been.

We love the Word of God. That is the number one reason why five years ago, I came here to your Lead Pastor. And that's a great start. But what this world needs today—truth be told it has always needed it—is for the people of God to love the Word of God so much that we live it out daily. And we live it out in ways like Jesus did, unexpected, shocking, the road not taken—turning common sense upon its head. Taking risks, walking in faith, loving others beyond what is reasonable, extravagant in grace, bold, truthful, going where no one else is willing to go, doing what no one else is willing to do, creating space in our life for others, praying constantly, living as salt and light, hearts open to the work of the Holy Spirit and waiting expectantly for Jesus' touch to empower and give us clear sight.

The world needs us to be the Church—an outpost of the Kingdom of our Lord and Christ in the middle of a broken world, seizing ground for our King, pushing back the darkness, one life at a time.