

Sermon: Me Too  
Text: Mark 8:22-26  
Date: September 30, 2018  
Context: WWPC  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

...when Jesus had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him,  
he asked him, 'Can you see anything?'

Mark 8:23

This doesn't always happen but I had an epiphany while I was working on this sermon--a moment when I saw something as if in bright light for the first time.

Today's text is a story about a man who could not see the world clearly. I realized I know this story because it's also a story about me.

He was blind. Me too.

As many of you know, when I first got out of college I lived in Kenya for two years. I was surrounded every day by Africans, Kenyans. They were my colleagues in the office, my neighbors in the community where I lived.

They filled the local market where I bought my groceries and they flooded the streets of Nairobi where I walked and drove and sometimes shopped.

Naturally the great majority of Nairobi's residents are descendants of native-born Kenyans. They are members of the various tribes that comprised the population of this beautiful East African country before it even was a country: Kikuyus, Maasi, Samburu, Kalenjin, Turkanas, others.

Many of the colleagues I worked with and the strangers I passed were, thus, descendants of women and men whose homelands were expropriated by outsiders, by colonists equipped with guns and driven by the astonishingly arrogant belief that they were somehow entitled to these lands that did not belong to them.

What this means, in turn, is that I looked out at all these people and saw just regular city folks, residents of Nairobi. But in historical terms a huge percentage of them were, in effect, displaced people. Refugees in their own country.

They had been forced to relocate because their family homes were now tea and coffee plantations. They were forced to learn and speak my native language, even though English was completely and literally foreign to their forefathers and foremothers.

I didn't see this clearly at the time because I personally did not drive their forebears off their small family farms and expropriate their lands.

I did not herd them onto tea plantations and into work camps, so that people who look like me could enjoy afternoon tea at their country club, and drive their safari vehicles on brand new roads out to look at the lions and elephants and flamingos.

I knew some of this history intellectually, but I didn't fully see its effects because I am white and I have the luxury of not seeing it.

And also because I enjoyed being able to speak English in Kenya. It made it easy to be there. I enjoyed having afternoon tea, and I loved driving my car out to the game parks to see the lions and the elephants and the flamingos.

I didn't see it because I once was blind.

Now, fast forward a few decades.

Since graduating from seminary, I've had the privilege of visiting the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation three times.

In all those visits I didn't see it, or at least I didn't see it fully. I only caught a blurry vision of it, like the man in this story who, after having had his sight partially restored, initially mistakes people for trees.

I did not see clearly what it's like to have your whole way of life taken away from you in a historical blink of an eye -- to have your main food source, your language, your cultural and spiritual practices, even your children, taken away by people who look like me, just dressed in different clothes:

Buffalo hunters and soldiers and fortune seekers who invade your homeland, equipped with guns and driven by the astonishingly arrogant belief that they are entitled to these lands that do not belong to them.

And I didn't see it because in each case, at the end of my three visits to Pine Ridge, I got in my car and drove off the reservation.

I left the trauma and the anger behind and drove back to my life, back to the happy place where my native language and my native religion and my natural skin color define everything about the world I inhabit, and give me a staggering set of privileges that I am so blind to I don't even know they're privileges.

Like a fish that doesn't know it's swimming in the Atlantic Ocean, the largest ocean in the world, because the ocean is its natural habitat.

I didn't see it because I once was blind.

Now, fast reverse back, with me, if you will, to the beginning.

I've grown up around women, and been close to women my whole life -- my mother, my sister Susan, my Aunt Alice and Aunt Carol, my cousins Margie and Lori, my now sweet wife, Robyn, and still I didn't see it.

I didn't really fully see it when my mother went to her pastor to get his counsel. She went in search of spiritual guidance and emotional support around how to deal with the challenges of living with a man who in his latter years began to drink so heavily that he often fell flat on his face in the living room.

She did not get the support she sought and deserved. Instead, her Bible-believing, fundamentalist pastor told her that it was likely her fault, that if her husband was an alcoholic, she was almost certainly the one driving him to drink.

I didn't see it because I wasn't in the room.

I didn't see it when my ex-brother-in-law threw my sister around the kitchen, and punched her in the face and screamed at her and dominated her and bullied her and once even pulled a butcher knife on her, and then afterwards insisted that it was really her fault for making him so angry.

I didn't see it because I wasn't in the room.

I didn't see it when an innocent young woman on her way to the bathroom was shoved from behind into a small bedroom, and then was shoved down onto the bed in that bedroom.

I didn't see how a man who would someday be nominated to the SC of the United States climbed on top of her and began to grope and fondle her and try to remove her clothes.

I didn't see him clap his hand over her mouth when she began to scream. I did not see how he and his friend walked down the hallway afterward, joking and laughing with each other, as though they'd just shared something extremely funny, not extremely terrifying.

I didn't see it because I wasn't in the room.

All this time, I have been partially blind to the experience of women, even women I love and am close to.

My vision obscured by a combination of ignorance about how sexism works, by geography -- I wasn't in the room -- and sometimes, as much as I hate to say it, by willful blindness. I didn't see it because it was easier not too. It meant I didn't have to change.

On the day this same woman sat down in front of an intimidating array of United States Senators, here's what I did see. I saw a woman engage in a breathtaking, possibly history-making act of bravery.

I saw and heard a group of angry white men yelling, including the candidate himself.

I saw and heard the senators apologize not her but to him. I saw and heard them expressing their regret at the shabby way he had been treated by members of the United States Senate.

What I did not see, at least not at first, is that these same elected officials are the political descendants of senators and statesmen before them, men -- all men, all white -- who believed that "Negros" were only 3/5ths human, and wrote that provision into our Constitution.

Men who believed it was perfectly normal for them to own other human beings and to use them for their own purposes, whatever those purposes might be, from harvesting their cotton to satisfying their sexual whims.

Men who described the native population of this country as “savages” and enshrined that belief in the Declaration of Independence.

Men who believed women were far too hysterical, and far too irrational, to be entrusted with something so sacred as the vote.

So, on Friday, our senators were behaving quite predictably. They were simply standing in the same tradition as the privileged and entitled men who came before them.

But watching the video clips of Friday’s hearing, I didn’t see any of that at first. Until the miracle happened.

This may sound too easy or too fast but I was blind to all of that until the moment when it felt like Jesus himself reached out and touched my eyes.

Though if it was Jesus, I’ll admit that he appeared in a most unlikely guise: the face of a young African American girl.

I don’t know her name, only that her photo was taken by the White House photographer, Pete Souza. In the photo she is being held in the arms of a black man.

Barrack Obama as it turns out. Mr. Obama is facing the opposite direction, away from the camera. He is staring at a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, hanging on the wall of the White House. Lincoln, the man who made it possible for the son of a Kenyan farmer to be standing in that hallway, as President of the United States of America.

But even as he gazed at the portrait of Mr. Lincoln, Mr. Obama was holding this young African American girl in his arms. I don’t know the story of how that moment came to be. I only know that in the photo she was staring right back at me, and the look on her face served to open my eyes.

It was the very picture of happiness. In Mr. Obama’s strong and gentle arms, she clearly felt safe and happy and loved.

She is too young to know the stories of how, not so long ago, men who look like me strung up men who look like the president and hung them from trees. Just for the fun of it.

She is too young to know that still to this day, many men who look like me believe that women like her mother and her aunties, and all women for that matter, regardless of their race, were put on this earth to keep silent and to make them happy, to cook their food, wash their clothes, and, yes, to satisfy them in the bedroom whether they, the women, wanted to or not.

She's too young to know any of that. But I'm not. Staring into her young, beautiful, innocent face, I saw my own world reflected back at me, along with my privileged place in it.

I saw the violence perpetrated by men who look like me, on men who look like the president, on women, on people of color in countries all around the world.

I also now see that in order to create the kind of safe and peaceful world that young girl deserves to grow up in, we can no longer tolerate it when women's stories are not believed. We cannot accept a world where even today young black boys are shot to death by people like me when they reach for their Skittles.

So, to do my small part to help create a world where that little girl can be safe even when she is not being held in the arms of a U.S. president, I need to offer my own kind of confession here today.

To everyone in this room who has suffered sexual abuse or trauma -- mostly women but maybe some men too -- to anyone who has been violated or assaulted in this way, I say this: I am sorry for what happened to you.

I hope you will find your voice. You have a right to tell your story. You have a right to be heard and believed. So let me say it right here, right now, from this pulpit: I believe you.

I want you to become more than a victim, more even than just survivor. I want you to become fully yourself. I want you to be liberated from your trauma so that you can safely live into and fully experience the world around you and the wonder that is uniquely you, fearlessly alive in that world.

I know that many of the women in this room have not been sexually assaulted. But I also know that at some point in your life, in fact, at many points in your life, you have been silenced by men, or ignored by men, or spoken down to by men, or humiliated by men.

So I say to you, too: I am sorry you've had that experience. And I am especially sorry if I have ever done that to you.

Which brings us, finally, to the people in this room who look like me.

To all the men here today, including myself, let me say that we have to do better.

I am not asking you to atone for sins you did not commit, or to confess to violence you did not perpetrate--though if you have engaged in any acts of violence against women, I hope you will confess that, so that you might be forgiven and also set free from whatever guild or shame you might be experiencing.

But I am asking you to consider the ways in which white, male, patriarchal privilege has visited deep and lasting trauma upon the people of the earth--from the women in our lives, to people we've never met, living in places we've perhaps never been, and also to consider the ways you have been party to that.

So I will also ask you this: Are you willing to let your eyes be opened, and to see the world, and your place in it, clearly? Are you?

Me too.

Are you sorry for what happened in Kenya and India and South Africa? Sorry for what happened on Pine Ridge and Wounded Knee and Standing Rock? Are you?

Me too.

Are you sorry for what happened to my mother and my sister and perhaps to your mother and your sister and maybe even to your wife at some point in her life? Are you?

Me too?

And sorry for what happened to Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and to millions of women like her who have not yet found the courage to tell their stories, including I

am certain, more than a few women sitting in this sanctuary today? Do you believe her story and their stories?

Me too.

Are willing to join with allies of all genders and races who are fighting to make the world safe for that little girl staring out at her future from the arms of the president?

Me too.

Are you willing to set aside your power, your privilege and your dominance and to come alongside women and people of color, right here in Asheville and around the globe, to do the work of repairing the world, work that is fundamental to establishing God's reign -- God's realm of love and peace, justice and mutuality, right here on earth as it is in heaven?

Are you willing to do that?

Good! Me too!

So there's only one thing left to say: Let's get started!