

August 23, 2015

A Sermon Preached by
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“For Those with Eyes to See”

Psalm 115:1-11

Matthew 13:10-17

Spider webs have a way of popping up seemingly out of nowhere, sometimes in places where you least expect to see them. Indeed, sometimes you don't see them at all and you walk right into them getting the sticky web in your face and hair, hoping the spider itself has not crawled somewhere onto your body.

*God's miracles are everywhere,
“for those with eyes to see.”*

These webs are irritating whenever they appear around your house and yard and I find the best way to get rid of them is by sweeping them away with a broom; which is exactly what I intended to do with the spider web that appeared on our back porch recently after my wife Leslie and I had been away for a few days. Until I got up close and took a good look at this particular web. I was so impressed that I was compelled to take a photograph which I have shared with you today on the back page of your bulletin. Have you ever seen anything in nature more perfect? Can you imagine how the tiny spider making its home in the center of this web constructed these 30 to 35 concentric



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circles bisected into approximately 25 equal pie shaped pieces coming together at the center of the spider's home, forming the lair in which it would trap its food? I was so impressed that I had to photograph the web and send it to many relatives and friends. I titled my photograph, “God's Handiwork.” Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my friends to whom I sent the photo, dubbed it the “Sacred Web” and reminded me how God's miracles are everywhere, “for those with eyes to see.”

My thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor for giving me the title to my sermon today and my thanks for the reminder of how God reveals God's self in the common places of our lives. We need only have the eyes to see.

When was the last time you came upon a spider web and thought of it as sacred? When was the last time you thought to preserve a spider web for the Godliness it represents? When was the last time your eyes were opened to the common place beauty of God which surrounds us every day?

I suspect you have reveled in the

beauty of a sunset, a starry sky, a full moon or a luxurious garden. But, there is oh so much more for us to observe if only we have the eyes to see. But, unfortunately somehow things get in our way and either obstruct our vision or distract it to a subject less rewarding.

Just as occurred in the days of the prophet Jeremiah, where God's power as creator of all that surrounds us was not acknowledged by the people of Israel and where it was therefore written in Jeremiah Chapter 5, "Hear this, O foolish and senseless people who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear, They do not say in their hearts; "Let us fear the Lord our God who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest. Your iniquities have turned those away and your sins have deprived you of good."

The bible is replete with such references. In Psalms, Chapter 115, verses 4-7, we read that the idols of the people are silver and gold, the work of human hands because they have eyes but do not see. In Ezekiel 12:2, we read "Mortal you are living in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see." And in Isaiah 6:9-10 we hear the voice of the Lord exclaiming that His people keep looking but do not understand. Finally, in the New Testament in Matthew

13:15-17 it is said of the people, "You will indeed listen but never understand and you will indeed look but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull . . . and they have shut their eyes so that they might not look with their eyes . . . and understand with their heart."

How can one not have faith if one's eyes are truly opened to the miracles which surround us every day?

Of course all those passages are speaking of faith or, more accurately, the lack of faith of a people whose idols are described as silver and gold, who worship the work of human hands, who do not credit God for the rain and the harvest, whose hearts have grown dull, who have shut their eyes so that they might not look with their eyes. I too speak of faith when I speak of "those with eyes to see." How can one not have faith if one's eyes are truly opened to the miracles which surround us every day? As, for example, the miracle of this spider web and the tiny spider which from its body wove this web. If we do not have the eyes to see this miracle then, I submit, as has been stated throughout the Old and New Testaments that our hearts have grown dull, that we have shut our eyes, that silver and gold and that which it can buy and that which it represents have become a greater priority in our life. And, that although

we have eyes, we do not see.

Barbara Brown Taylor, named by Time Magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world and who has previously been acclaimed as one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English speaking world, who will be addressing you from this pulpit in January, has addressed this topic in her book, *An Altar in the World*, which I would commend to each of you for reading. In the book she reveals how to see the sacred in our everyday lives. One of these ways, she says, is to pay attention. The practice of paying attention, she says, takes time. “Most of us move so quickly that our surroundings become no more than the blurred scenery we fly past on our way to somewhere else,” she says. “We pay attention to the speedometer, the wristwatch, the cell phone, the list of all the things we have to do. No one has time to lie on the deck watching stars, or to wonder how one’s hand came to be, or to see the soul of a stranger walking by. The artist, Georgia O’Keefe, who became famous for her sensuous paintings of flowers, explained her success by saying, ‘In a way, nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small, we haven’t time – and to see takes time.’”

Those who have eyes to see take the time to see. That is important. And in order to take time to see it is important that from time to time we take our eyes

off those things which occupy our time which keep us from viewing those miracles which surround us every day. I am reminded of a T-shirt I saw in a store in Canada last summer which I wish I had purchased. It said “Let’s go someplace really cool this weekend and stare at our cell phones.” You laugh, but oh how true that is and how unfortunate that our vision of the world around us is blurred by such distractions, distractions which cause us to take our eyes off the road in more ways than one.

*Those who have eyes to see
take the time to see.*

It is my belief that if we can discipline ourselves to rid ourselves of distractions which prevent us from seeing, if we open our eyes to see the miracle of the ordinary, we will have eyes to see the extraordinary, miracles that we may never have noticed before. I know there are those of you here who have seen and experienced such miracles. And I know also, that to see and experience those miracles, you first had to have the eyes to see, as well as the heart and the faith to believe.

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Jesus said, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin yet even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." This is one of my favorite biblical passages, one I turn to again and again, to help sustain my faith. Yet, it was not until I reflected upon this verse in preparation for this sermon that I understood what was previously a hidden message, at least for me. I have always interpreted this passage as a parable on faith, about how God will always provide for us, as God does for the lilies of the field. The part I had not fully appreciated, however, was the very beginning of this passage, the first three words, "Consider the lilies." These three words emphasize the importance of taking the time to consider, to take the time to reflect, to reverently study God's creation, God's wonders. To take the time to see. For, taking the time to see is, I believe, an essential element of our faith. And, I submit, we cannot have eyes to see until we take the time to do so, to take a break from our hurried pace, to avert our gaze from the earthly treasures we seek and the worldly goods for which we strive to focus rather on God's treasures which are there for us to enjoy from day to day, if only we have the eyes to see.

I am often reminded of how we ignore the importance of taking the time to truly see, of how we often fail

to consider the lilies and the glory which surrounds us.

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Leslie and I recently returned from a trip to Europe where we visited Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Amsterdam and other beautiful cities along the Danube and the Rhine Rivers. While in Budapest we enjoyed a tour of that beautiful city on the open deck of a double decker bus which allowed us to hop on and off at the various sites throughout Budapest. In front of us on the bus I noticed a young couple who were very affectionate toward each other seemingly enjoying the cool breeze on this open air bus on this gorgeous sunny day. The couple got off the bus at one of the same stops as my wife and I and when we returned from our visit to a sight along the way, they had also returned and were ready to board the bus as were we. There were two buses waiting. The first was an enclosed bus, the second was the open air bus on which we had been riding. We had the choice of taking either. The enclosed bus was leaving right away. The open air bus would not leave for another fifteen minutes. The couple who had been sitting in front of us on the tour began discussing which bus to take. The wife obviously anxious to resume the tour immediately told the man, who I assumed was her

husband, that she wanted to take the enclosed bus. The man suggested that fifteen minutes was not that long to wait, that it was such a beautiful day they should take the open air bus. The wife responded, rather firmly, that she couldn't believe he wanted to take the bus which left fifteen minutes later just so he could feel the wind blow through his hair. He lost the argument, and, as we boarded the closed-in bus which was leaving right away, the bus the people we were with also chose, I looked at the gentleman and said not a word, but smiled in empathy. He smiled back at me and said, "I've learned to pick my fights." Obviously, this was not a fight he wanted to pick. But what a shame, that so often, all of us elect to take the fastest bus and, in an effort to save time, in an effort to get on with whatever we are to do next, we do not take the time to see and we, therefore, miss the opportunity to experience God's gifts, God's miracles, if you will.

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If we are to have the eyes to see, it is also important that in addition to taking the time to see, that we have the heart to see, for clearly, if our hearts are not open, no matter how wide we

open our eyes, we will not see.

You may have noticed in the biblical passages I referenced earlier that in addition to mentioning the importance of having eyes to see, it was also important that we understand through our hearts. For through understanding comes faith. Recall the message of today's scripture from Matthew 13:15-17. "You will indeed listen but never understand and you will indeed look but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull and their ears are hard of hearing and they have shut their eyes so that they might not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and understand with their heart."

Anne Lamott, in her book, *Travelling Mercies*, writes of an experience she had in her bedroom in the midst of a depressed state of mind when she was seeking more for her life than what life was offering her at the time. She wrote, "After a while as I lay there I became aware of someone with me hunkered down in the corner. After a while more, I knew beyond a doubt that it was Jesus. I felt Him just sitting there on His haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love and I squinted my eyes shut but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing Him with."

Anne Lamott had eyes to see but it

was not with her eyes that she was seeing. It was with her heart and through her faith. Some might argue that what she saw was a figment of her imagination but, clearly, it was not to her and, as a result, what she saw changed her life.

I submit, your life and mine can also be changed if we will allow ourselves the time and opportunity to see, not only with our eyes but also with our hearts.

Allow me to conclude with a personal story. It is about someone who I know very well. Indeed, it involves two people I know well. The woman was awakened one night for a reason she could not explain. She sat up in bed to look around for she felt there was something strange in the hallway outside her daughter's bedroom. She saw something in the hallway but could not make it out. Like Anne Lamott she squinted her eyes, then rubbed them, but what she saw did not go away. It just hovered outside her daughter's bedroom. She went back to sleep, but when she woke up the vision she had seen outside her daughter's bedroom was gone but it did not leave her mind. She was bothered by it, so she cancelled the tennis game she had scheduled and cancelled the sitter she had arranged to stay with her daughter. Suddenly, her daughter, just three months old, became very sick. The mother

immediately rushed her daughter to the hospital where, after some testing, she was diagnosed with bacterial spinal meningitis, an often deadly disease and, more often than not, a disease which leaves its victims with permanent mental or physical disabilities. Because of the mother's quick response, her daughter's life was not only spared but she had no lasting effects from this normally devastating disease. Had the mother's eyes not been opened to what she had seen from her bed that night, she would not have stayed home and would not have been there to take care of her daughter who has grown into a beautiful young lady with a family of her own to watch over, just as her mother did her. And, as does her mother, she too has eyes to see.

My spider web is gone now. I had intended to save my little miracle for as long as I could, to share it with others and to observe the activities of the spider in its web. But, the next day it was gone, swept away by the yard men who were doing what they do best, keeping my yard clean and neat.

If only I have eyes to see.

But, there would be more such miracles, I thought. If only I pay attention, if only I use my heart and my faith, as well as my eyes. If only I have eyes to see.



“God’s Handiwork”

*This is a sample meditation that is posted weekly on Dr. Hood's blog
<http://firstdelray.com.blogspot.com>
To subscribe, enter your email address on the top of the blog page.*

The Common Life Lived Uncommonly

*"To one he gave five valuable coins, and to another he gave two,
and to another he gave one."*

Matthew 25:15 (Common English Bible)

It is natural to strive for greatness, for recognition and for making a large contribution. Each one of us is endowed with some talent, some gift and ability and the business of life is to discover what it is. Once discovered, that talent is developed and polished much like a rough, natural diamond that is placed in the hands of a jeweler. No one really wants to be common. Every normal young person has dreams and aspirations and strives to get on with life, to climb the success ladder and pass others in the walk of life.

This is admirable, of course, if the motivation is wholesome and the desire is directed toward worthy ends. But our Lord's parable of the valuable coins is a reminder that there is a limit on each one of us. Some may be endowed with greater ability but everyone has some limit on capacity for achievement. Five star generals do not win battles by themselves. Without apology, Jesus teaches that talent and ability is unevenly distributed. Some people will be exceptionally talented and have the potential for greater accomplishment than others. Some are uncommonly gifted and many of us are simply common.

The question then becomes, will we do our best with what we have? Will we focus our efforts for maximum contribution, for the welfare of others or will we begin to whine and recline because we cannot shine? Unreasonable expectations and demands upon ourselves result in chronic unhappiness and diminish not only our lives but also the lives of those who love us. There are far more ordinary doctors, lawyers, persons in the service sector and administrative roles than exceptional ones. Yet, each has the capacity to make an important contribution each day to their families, friends and community.

The simple and practical course to follow is to make a realistic appraisal of our capacity and gifts. This may mean for many the discarding of delusions of grandeur, acknowledging and accepting that in the Lord's distribution of gifts we may have received only one or two talents, and that God's expectation of us is the same as those who received five talents. The acid test of character is whether we have discovered what talent we have and then, having discovered it, placed it to maximum use. That is when the common life is lived uncommonly.

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