

**A Community to Check Our Vision**  
**Sermon 158 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 30, 2022**  
**Mark 8:22-26 & 1 Corinthians 13:11-13**

About a year ago I decided it was time to reach out for help. We'd moved into our house two and a half years prior and I'd been struggling to figure out how to place the furniture in the living room. It is a long, rectangular shaped room with a fireplace centered on one of the longer walls. There was something quirky on every wall making it nearly impossible to arrange the sofa, the chairs, the bookshelves, and the tv in such a way that nurtured conversation and beauty. We had tried making things fit, using the furniture we brought with us from a totally different kind of house, and no matter how many ways we tried to configure the space, it just didn't feel right.

So after two and a half years of trying to make it work, I reached out for help.

My friend, Janet, was eager to receive the call. She'd recently launched her own business called "Artful Arranging." Her whole market was people like me who just couldn't figure out how to make the pieces work. Janet has a real gift for helping us re-arrange our stuff, the things we already have, in a way that makes more sense, that feels better, and that is ultimately more beautiful than it was before.

After a twenty-minute FaceTime tour of my house, Janet's creative wheels started spinning. I knew this was going to work! "Send me a sketch of your floor plan," she said, "draw it to scale and also include your furniture as well so that I can get a sense of all the proportions... how things will fit when I start moving them around."

Even though we just wanted help with the one room, Janet had asked for a map of the whole downstairs. She wanted to see the bigger picture so that she could understand - from 160 miles away - the experience of being in our house.

We got to work measuring the rooms and drawing out the floor plan. Then we measured the furniture and sent those dimensions as well. After about a week, Janet reached back out and said she was ready to talk through her vision for the room.

The next Saturday, Justin and I spent a couple of hours on a call with Janet who had created mood boards and new diagrams of our rooms - all of them in the downstairs part of our home. "Turn the desk in the office 90 degrees so it is framed by the window when you look into that room from the adjacent space." "Pull the sofa off the wall and put the chairs facing it from either side of the fireplace. Center a rug beneath them to define this as a place for conversation.... You'll have a nice pathway behind the sofa for people to walk without disrupting the conversation area." "Move those two bookshelves from the office into the living room. It'll declutter the office and provide a nice frame for the chairs on that long wall." "Oh! And... How much do you like your dining room curtains? They have a totally different feel than the rest of your house. Ever thought about changing those?"

As Janet talked us through her vision for our house, we began to see it more clearly. We'd had some good elements all along, we just needed help figuring out how to arrange them in this new and different space.

It took us a couple of days to get all the furniture moved around, and we had to check back in with Janet at certain moments along the way, but when the re-arranging was done, everything felt better.

Even to this day, whenever we hang out in our artfully arranged living room, we give thanks for our friend Janet and the way she helped us to see.

Janet did for our living room what holy friends can do for our lives.

Dr. Gregory Jones at Duke Divinity School defines holy friends as “those who name the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim, and help us dream the dreams we otherwise would not dream.”<sup>1</sup>

His colleague, Dr. Victoria White builds upon his work in her new book titled, *Holy Friends*, saying:

*A holy friendship is different from an ordinary friendship because it is held in God's love and part of God's bigger, ongoing story in the world<sup>2</sup>...*

*Holy friends may not look different to the outside world. What sets them apart is that they have a larger purpose beyond the friendship itself: they help point both people toward God.*<sup>3</sup>

Holy friends look at our lives and see the bigger picture. They offer us perspective on the things we can no longer see. They bring their unique gifts to help us work through our personal struggles. And they point out - with great care of course - the places where we have work to do.

Holy friends help us to see what we cannot see for ourselves.

While the term wasn't explicitly used in the story of Jesus healing the blind man at Bethsaida, this is a story of holy friendship.

It is different from the story of Bartimaeus, who shows up just 2 chapters later in this Gospel. Unlike Bartimaeus, this man isn't neglected or alone. Jesus does not happen upon him on the way to someplace else. No, this man is brought to Jesus by his friends. It is the friends who bring the blind man to Jesus in search of healing. And it is Jesus, who acts in friendship to restore the sight that was lost somewhere along the way.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Jones in *Holy Friendships*. Forthcoming Victoria White, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Victoria White, *Holy Friendships*. 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 18.

This healing story is also unique because it appears that the man was not born blind. We can tell because as his vision is restored, he knows what he is looking at. "I can see people, but they look like trees walking around," he said. How could he have known what these looked like if he had never seen them before? This man was not born blind, something happened to him along the way. And his friends never gave up hope that healing was possible.

There are so many healing stories in the Gospels, and as we read them, we begin to see that they are most often about so much more than physical healing. In fact often times, the physical healing simply points to, or is a metaphor for the social and spiritual healing that needs to occur.

This particular story comes at a point in Mark's Gospel where the disciples are struggling to see clearly. They are struggling to understand what following Jesus means, and so I wonder if this short little story about the unnamed man in Bethsaida could be some kind of metaphor for how they might regain their sight, their vision, their understanding of the calling to follow Christ?

I wonder because reading this story, there is so much we don't know. We don't know when this man lost his sight. We don't know how or why... We don't know who his friends were or how they knew what needed to be done...

But I sure am glad they did and it reminds me to give thanks for the friends in my life who have known - exactly where to point me when my sight begins to blur.

Holy friends help us see what we can no longer see for ourselves.

This story reminds us that the Christian life is not meant to be lived alone; rather, it is meant to be shared in community with other people and with God. The apostle Paul used the metaphor of the body to describe this to the Corinthians saying that in Christ we are all part of one body. We bring different gifts, different experiences, different skills, and different perspectives but we are all one in Christ. Paul must have known how difficult it is to live as one whole and united body when we have all these differences because as soon as he finishes describing the unity of the body, he urges us to love one another and then gives us the reason:

*For now we see dimly...*

*Now we see only in part...*

Alone and left to our own devices we can easily forget how much we need one another. We can allow our egos to expand so much that we honestly begin to believe that our success is the fruit of our own labor, that we can take care of ourselves, and that we don't really need any help.

Or, when things aren't going so well, we can fall into despair. When the job that we thought was a dream turned out to be more of a nightmare. When the relationships that

matter most become more complicated than they once were. When the death of a loved one hits us harder than we might have expected and we can't seem to pull ourselves out of the shadow of grief.

Alone, we see only in part... we need one another to catch a glimpse of the bigger picture.

Holy friends look at our lives and see the bigger picture. They offer us perspective on the things we can no longer see. They bring their unique gifts to help us work through our personal struggles. And they point out - with great care of course - the places where we have work to do.

In her book called, *The Gravity of Joy*, Dr. Angela Gorrell writes about a time when she lost three family members in a four-week period of time. Overcome with grief, she did not believe she would ever find her way again. As part of her job - a researcher studying joy (ironically) - she went with a small team to lead a Bible study in a women's prison. What she found was that these women were holy friends to one another, who allowed their gifts to bring one another back to wholeness, one week at a time. Hear how she describes one of the weeknight Bible study meetings:

At first, singing was my least favorite part of leading Bible study because I was incredibly self-conscious. Over time, it became my favorite part of the evening... One evening, we sang "This Little Light of Mine" especially passionately. We had begun the tradition, started by one of the women, of having different people in the circle create their own line to the song, and then we would join in. For example, a woman might call out, "All up in this place," and we would chime in, "I'm gonna let it shine!"

This particular night, everyone was out of their seats, and we were jumping and dancing and singing "This Little Light of Mine" so loudly that one of the corrections officers came into the room. She watched what was happening with amazement. She joined us and started clapping her hands and smiling.

### **Joy gathers.**

As we sang, our ashes seemed to become crowns of beauty, our mourning turned into joy, and our spirits of despair transformed into praise.

Our music became an act of resistance to all the forms of death that happened and were happening in our lives. Our singing turned into embodied opposition to our fear, our anger, and profound loss. Our joyful noise opposed the imprisonment of bodies, minds, and hearts.

Suddenly, we were rejoicing in what ought to be.

Our dancing, jumping, clapping, and singing together pushed against voices that declared "You are not alone," "You are worthless," or "There is no hope."

The louder we sang and declared new truths, the more the voices saying to us, “You do not matter,” “Your grief will never lift,” or “Your struggle will never be overcome” **were quieted.**

### **It was healing joy.**

In the very act of gathering — of committing to rejoice[,] to recognize what is good and true, and to declare our meaning and dignity through God’s love — we were participating in the very joy of God. (p. 89-90)

Week after week, these women witnessed to God’s faithfulness, trusted God, cried out to God, and believed the promises of Scripture. **I clung to their hope and convictions until mine came back.** I did not have much faith during those first months of visiting the prison, but these women held faith for me.

Like the friends who took the man [...] to Jesus, their faith was healing me. (p. 92)

Sometimes I wonder if we have lost our sight a little bit in all the time we have spent alone these last few years. As our worlds got really small, I wonder if our **vision was blurred a bit**, causing us not only to lose touch with each other but in so doing, to lose a sense of the bigger picture. And if this is the case, maybe we need to remember this group of holy friends.... A community to check our vision and to lead us back to Jesus whenever our sight begins to blur...

I can almost see it now... a church full of different people with different experiences, perspectives... different interests, and different gifts...

...A network of **holy friends**

who can remember each one of us at our best,

Who can see the promise in us that we can no longer see...

Who can show us the work we need to do...

**friends** who haven’t given up on our ability to be restored to wholeness,

friends who can take hold of us -

in love and with great compassion -

and walk us all the way to Jesus

so that our sight, our vision, our **hope** might be restored...

And so that together, we might

dream **dreams** that alone,

Would have never been possible.