

“FAITH’S SIGHT,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul Untied Church of Christ, Taylor, Michigan, September 27, 2020

Nine decades ago in the days of silent motion picture films the famous Hollywood director Cecil B. DeMille announced that he was going to make the first film ever about Jesus Christ for the silver screen. Almost immediately a hue and cry of opposition was heard across America. In those days many Christians, especially those in the South, regarded movies as another lure of the devil. Yet what really outraged these Christians was the thought of a human actor impersonating Jesus. While we wouldn’t think twice about this today, in their book, any depiction of Jesus on the screen could only be a profanation of our savior. They didn’t trust Hollywood to treat Jesus right. But all the voiced outrage couldn’t stop Cecil B. DeMille. He went right ahead with the production and release of his silent film.

Called *The King of Kings* (1927), it premiered at Grauman’s Chinese Theater in Los Angeles on May 24, 1927. The movie proved to be a big box office draw and a commercial success. Amid the film’s flickering images, much of the script quotes directly from the Bible. To this day, every so often, Cecil B. DeMille’s *King of Kings* reemerges from film archives to be shared with audiences interested in the history of film. This past year one Lutheran Church had plans to screen the silent film to organ accompaniment as a benefit for their organ fund. Unfortunately, it had to be postponed because of the Covid-19 health crisis.

Several years ago, I had a chance to view *King of Kings* as a part of a film series hosted at a church. And I was glad for it. While this cinematic account of Jesus struck me as somewhat primitive, I found myself strangely touched and moved by its flickering images of him. The film depicts the drama of Jesus’ final week, leading to his cross at Calvary. But it also presents his resurrection. In that very final scene, the heretofore black and white screen bursts into technicolor. It was one of the first uses of technicolor ever. Yet the scene of the DeMille film most memorable to me comes early--indeed, very early, when we first meet Jesus through the eyes of a blind girl.

Putting us in the blind girl’s place, DeMille initially engulfs the screen in total blackness. Then, after announcing through printed captions that the young girl has met a man who is reaching out to her healing, we see in the darkness the emergence of a soft light. The light persists—and grows. It literally glows. Amid this growing and glowing light we also begin to perceive a shape---the vague outline of a face. Moment by moment, it loses that vagueness, becoming more defined as the young girl’s sight is healed and restored. At last the face, looming large before the girl, is clear. It is a friendly, benignly smiling face. It is a kind and loving face. It is the face of Jesus.

In watching Jesus appear to the blind girl, it's hard not to get emotional. I don't know if those Christians who were so upset by the merest thought of Jesus on the silver screen ever got over their ire and pique. Yet this morning I can testify that, at least in this case, Cecil B. DeMille treated Jesus right. That scene and others making up the film are pearls. In his silent picture DeMille powerfully captured what an encounter with Jesus can mean and the joy of seeing him for the first time. I came away from the film thinking about when and how I really saw Jesus for the first time. I mean *really* saw him.

As professed Christian men and women, we almost take for granted that we see and know Jesus. But do we *really*? Is it deep and heart-felt? Even when we feel very comfortable and confident that we see and know Jesus, I suspect that there is still more for each of us to see and understand.

Such deeper seeing is not just a challenge for us today. It has been a challenge for Christian believers throughout time. Jesus' earliest disciples and apostles knew him first-hand. He recruited them each for ministry. Thereafter, they walked with Jesus, ate with Jesus, preached with Jesus, and even slept at Jesus' side. Nevertheless, even they did not "see" Jesus as they should. It actually took a long time for the apostles to see and understand Jesus as man and savior.

One of those out-of-focus moments for the apostles came when Jesus took them on a mountain retreat. On that retreat, the apostles were given a special opportunity through God's grace and blessing to see Jesus transfigured alongside images of Moses and Elijah. This was God's way of saying to the apostles: *Look, see who Jesus is. He is my son, who fulfills the law of Moses and brings to fulfillment the prophecy of Elijah who announces the coming of the messiah.* But do the apostles grasp what God is saying to them and giving them to see? Not at all! They subsequently depart from the mountaintop as blind-sighted as about Jesus' true identity as their heaven-sent messiah. It is only later—much later—when Jesus dies at Calvary and then reappears in his resurrected state that the eyes of the apostles are, as scripture says, at last "opened." (*Luke 24:31*) Likewise, when Mary Magdalene runs from the garden tomb where she has encountered the risen Christ and declares to all with ears to hear that "I have seen the Lord!" it is as if she is really seeing him for the first time. (*John 20:15-20*)

Still later in the Bible we learn how it was necessary for God to temporarily blind the would-be Apostle Paul before he truly sees him. (*Acts 26:8-18*) Ironically, it is by hearing Jesus' voice speaking aloud to him that Paul, the persecutor of Christians, is finally able to recognize Jesus as the savior that the nation of Israel—and the rest of the world—has been so long awaiting. Moreover, not unlike all the other blind men and women whom Jesus healed, Paul found himself changed and transformed, rendered full, complete, and whole in Christ, through Christ. (*Colossians 2:10*) In those moments Paul is also directly

commissioned and dispatched by Jesus to Jewish and Gentile people alike “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith.” (Acts 26:17)

The blindness that was a problem for all the apostles can be a problem for more ordinary disciples. Anyone can spend a lot of time with Jesus without truly recognizing and appreciating him. Yet it is only as we do see Jesus as God’s son and our savior and keep our eyes fully open to him thereafter that we can be healed, changed, and, in time, fully transformed into the children of the light that God has always intended us to be.

A month ago, Jerry Falwell, Jr., son of the founder of the Moral Majority organization, resigned from his dual roles as president and chancellor of Liberty University after he posted a sexually suggestive photo of himself and a young woman online. Word about other extracurricular activities had also been filtering out. At Liberty University, Falwell was surrounded, you might say, by everything Jesus. Yet he transgressed his own university’s Christian honor code. From everything I’ve garnered Liberty University handled the situation very responsibly, maintaining its integrity. But the episode again underscores how those who profess to see Jesus, even better than others, can be pretty darn blind as to what Jesus wants for us and expects of us.

Ironically, when Jerry Falwell, Jr. resigned from his post, he happily declared himself, “Free at last!” What was this freedom he was talking out? Was he blaming his job as Liberty’s president for his inappropriate behavior? Folks, the problem was with him, not Liberty University. He was not acting like a Christian. Or, better said, he was not *being* a Christian.

Maybe Jerry Falwell, Jr., never really saw Jesus in the first place. Alternatively, he could have lost sight of Jesus along the way. Although it is hard to understand, it can possibly happen. Yes, temptation may have left Jesus a blur for Jerry Falwell, Jr. I hope that Mr. Falwell can and will get back on the track, looking more deeply in his life for Jesus and rediscovering what Jesus wants him to be and to do.

As I have found in my own life, imperfect as I am, seeing Jesus means recognizing his spiritual authority and lordship in all things and embracing his way of life for our lives. It all starts with love for God and love for one another. (Luke 10:27) It then more widely comes to encompass the virtues that we can see Jesus modeling and exemplifying through his own life unto death on the cross.

Historically, citing the Bible, our Christian churches have called these virtues the “fruits of the spirit.” With his gift of sight for Jesus gained on the Damascus road, the Apostle Paul names nine different virtues or spiritual fruits. Specifically, in his Letter to the Galatians which is found in the Bible after the four gospels, Paul proclaims that “the fruit of the

Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (*Galatians 5: 22-23*)

Congregation, Paul here presents us with a wonderful inventory and checklist by which to take stock of ourselves spiritually. How prominent are these fruits of the spirit at work in our own daily lives? If we’re not living this kind of life and showing forth these very qualities to others, then in all likelihood we aren’t seeing and following Jesus and his example very well.

Are you loving and joyful? And how are you doing with forbearance and self-control, particularly when it comes to judgmentalism and your temper? Do others notice and remark on your kindness, goodness, and gentleness? Does your faith shine in the way that you genuinely trust God?

As Paul takes pains to note in that same Letter to the Galatians, if we’ve really seen Jesus and we’re led by his example and Spirit, we’re not going to be give ourselves over to sexuality immorality or idolatry—the worship of false gods. We’re won’t allow envy, jealousy, and selfish ambition to get the better of us. Moreover, we’ll strive to do everything we can to resist hatred and unnecessary conflict, always checking and defusing any anger and rage that wells up in us so that it doesn’t hurt anybody, let alone ourselves. (*Galatians 5:18-21*)

Yes, seeing Jesus means being transformed by him. To be sure, we may all be works in progress. As the badge presented to our young confirmands last week declares: “Please be patient. God isn’t finished with me yet!” However, some evidence of transformation should already be visible in us if we are the truly sighted Christians we profess to be. As Jesus declares: “By their fruits, you shall know (or recognize) them.” (*Matthew 7:16-17*)

Importantly, when we have a clarity of vision in our faith walk with Jesus we help others see him too. Although nothing as grand as anything that Cecil B. De Mille might film, a pivotal episode in my life illustrates this for me. When I was pretty young kid growing up in Redford Township, we lived across the street from a Children’s Village maintained by the United Methodist Church. There was also a Methodist Church at the end of the street. In those earlier days, we were not “churched” family per se. My dad, an inventor in the automotive world, was away a lot. My mother was a former Roman Catholic not yet quite comfortable in the Protestant world. Occasionally, we would attend Sunday evening Vesper services in the chapel on the grounds of the Children’s Village. However, my mother enrolled us every summer in the Vacation Bible School hosted by the Methodist Church.

During Vacation Bible School I developed a great rapport with one of the volunteer teachers. We talked a lot even after the day’s class. She was encouraging nine-year old me to come to Sunday School even on my own because I lived within walking distance of

the church. “You know Jesus loves you,” she said to me. And she said with such a depth of sincerity and warmth of concern for me that I heard it and felt it and knew that it was true. It was a moment when I “saw” Jesus. And it was a moment that changed me. My teacher’s name eludes memory. But her face as she spoke to me about Jesus I’ll never forget. And I’ve been with Jesus ever since. Or should I say he’s been with me, in fuller and fuller sight.

As it turned out, I never did attend Sunday School at the Methodist Church down the street. My family was about to move ten miles away. However, after the move, my father suddenly announced that henceforth we would be going to church as a family every Sunday. We did thereafter without fail, week after week, never missing except when we headed off on vacation. I was blessed with the chance to grow in Christian faith and sight. I remain so grateful for the caring, eye-opening way that a Vacation Bible School teacher spoke with me. Little did she or I ever imagine that the way she was helping me see Jesus would lead to the life-long vocation in Christ that it has. Yes, the way we see Jesus and show it and share it can help others see Jesus too, whether or not they ever become a pastor like I have.

In this Covid-19 time, the world needs to see Jesus more than ever. For starters, we need to make sure that we have all blinders off and are really seeing and embracing Jesus as divine son and savior that he is. But with all the fruits of the spirit that come with such sight we need to help others see Jesus too. The way we talk to each other matters—not just in church but everywhere we go. The values we uphold by word and deed alike are so consequential too.

Let me close with the words of that famous, cherished hymn by former slaver John Newton, who saw Jesus and saw his own life healed, changed, and transformed.

“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found; was blind but now I see!” Amen.