

"Seeing What You Don't Want to See" by Pat Conover

10/29/2006 by Pat Conover: Seeing What You Don't Want to See

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Lectionary Scripture: Mark 10:46-52, Job 42: 1-6

Seeing What You Don't Want to See

Most of my sermons come easily. The core themes and images line up in my subconscious processes as part of my inward spiritual journey and then I just write them out and edit.

This sermon did not come that way. I have been resisting this sermon. It was not until I came to the sanctuary for my hour of silent meditation in preparation for recommitment that I came to understand that my resistance to this sermon was my key to the spiritual core of what needs to be said. Therefore, the title of this sermon is "Seeing What You Don't Want To See." This is a sermon I did not want to prepare and do not want to preach. Moreover, you probably do not want to hear it. There are some things that I do not want to attend to, and I am guessing that many of you do not want to attend to them

either. I mean, “attend to” in the sense of paying attention to, with emphasis on the word **“paying”**.

This sermon started out as a rant about the war in Iraq. If you want to read that rant, you can look at it in the [appendix](#) to the electronic version of this sermon. However, the sermon has shifted since I first engaged it. The sermon responds to the war in Iraq, but that content has become an example, a metaphor, for the spiritual challenge of “Seeing What You Don’t Want to See.”

I was given two gifts last Sunday that helped me into this sermon. The first was my response to [Anna’s sermon](#). She worked with her fear in part by sharing a story about someone who was lying in her tent and a bear came into the campground. My bear came into my tent and it is biting me. The second gift was being reminded by Sharon of a theme I was already working with for the sermon. God asks Job, “Where were you when I created the world?” In the lectionary for this Sunday, Job confesses his awe of God, his recognition that he thinks and feels only as a creature and not as God. With his recognition that he is not on an equal footing with God, that he cannot force God to argue with him within his human definition of the issues, he gives up his pretensions and says, “Therefore I yield, repenting in dust and ashes.” That is the end of the original story of Job before an editor came along and added a Hollywood ending.

I stand with the Hollywood editor. I like happy endings. I like my conflicts tidied up. I like stories that end in confession, repentance, forgiveness and the reestablishment of community. Nevertheless, I live in the mean time, pun intended, and it is not very tidy. Moreover, I am well aware

that real life does not follow Hollywood scripts very often.

In terms of the New Testament, we cannot really appreciate the saving power of the witness and presence of Jesus as the Christ until we can sense some solidarity with the disciples at the moment of the cross. Jesus is dead, publicly shamed. The disciples are scattered in their grief. Whatever there is to be of relief and healing is still to come. Rushing on to the resurrection before experiencing the cross is still one of the fundamental spiritual copouts for most of us during the Easter season.

We need to pause with Bartimaeus who had no vision through his eyes. Nevertheless, he saw and proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of David. That was a political proclamation, just the kind of thing that temple authorities and King Herod did not want to hear, and certainly could not "see." Jesus gave Bartimaeus his vision. Bartimaeus give us his vision and you probably do not want it any more than the disciples did. Opening your eyes to Jesus may bring you to a cross.

Hope and faith are good things. I have both, and I treasure both, as pillars of my life, the fruit of salvation. However, wanting to live in the comfort of hope and faith make me unwilling to really look at the things I do not want to see because they are flat out too awful to bear. [John Morris wisely spared us the accounts](#) of the awfulness of the factory farming and slaughter of animals. I was glad. Anna's bear stayed outside her tent and I was glad. David told us of the pain of caring about abused children but spared us the examples. I did not want to hear them.

I have been retired for almost two years from my work as Legislative Director for Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ. I have been surprised repeatedly by how much time I seem to need to be healing from my work. Several dimensions need healing. A big one is that I was constantly learning about and responding to things that are really wrong in the United States and around the world. I was following twenty or more issues at a time. Every issue was an issue because people were hurting, usually many people hurting a lot. I did not have time to stop and feel through my solidarity with so much pain, so many kinds of pain, in so many places. I needed to be callous so that I could function, to function quickly and efficiently. I was blessed and cursed that there was something I could do about all the issues. Usually they were inadequate things, weak things, but nonetheless they were things that kept me face on into the problems and eased my conscience at least a little. I was at least trying to help. I could never care enough but I could at least do something. Now I have less capacity to do things and time to be face-to-face with the challenge to care enough. I cannot keep up. There is more hurting than I can process. I usually escape with a little intercessory prayer.

I'm trying to read various books and articles about the war in Iraq, the chaos and tribal massacres in Congo, the collapse of hope in Afghanistan because we moved on to Iraq and left Afghanistan to the warlords that gave rise to the Taliban in the first place. I have tried to do such reading with a caring heart. It makes the reading go very slow. I have to stop and feel about what it would be like to live with your lips cut off, to live with having your children tortured and killed in front of you, to be tortured and killed by CIA operatives while wearing a hood.

This is too much for me to carry alone. Therefore, I am going to ask you for a little solidarity. I am going to ask you to think about something that you really do not want to think about. I am not asking you to look at the things I do not want to look at, just to look at the things you do not want to look at. We will take a couple minutes in silence for that now.

[Silence]

Now let us try one together for a couple of minutes. Imagine yourself on the 35th floor of the World Trade Center trying to get down the stairs before the building collapses. Please notice any resistance to staying with the images.

[Silence]

The horrible images of 9/11 give us a particular spiritual opportunity that many of us passed up, or visited only briefly. They gave us a chance to feel solidarity with people who live in fear for their lives every day. That includes the people who fear every day that they will be tortured or killed by the CIA, or soldiers, or mercenaries, representing you and me in Colombia, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and other places. It is not easy to be aware, to be in solidarity with, those who are being tortured and killed. It is harder to be aware and in solidarity with those who are doing the torturing and the killing, even when they are on your side, or maybe especially when they are on your side. What hurts me the most is that the torturing and killing is being done in my name and yours, done to protect us from our fears.

All the pain and problems in the world are not just the work of the empire that provides us so many privileges. I am thinking and praying for the child soldiers in the Congo fighting tribal battles, children who do their unspeakable work with machetes. I am thinking of parents who watch their children starve and die. I am thinking of the kids in gangs in and around Washington, DC. I am thinking of the people who have swallowed so much confusion and alienation and anonymity that they are lost in an emotional fog, overwhelmed in what is tidily packaged as mental illness so that we can forget our complicity. I am thinking about our toxic environment and all the hurts it causes. I am thinking of those who have to live towards hope and faith when they can no longer control their bodies or their minds. I am thinking of children who live in situations where nothing and no one is safe. I am thinking of the people who cannot afford the medications that would ease their physical agony, who have to hope for community when no one helps.

It is too much.

I want God to account to me for why such awfulness is allowed. I do not find much comfort in Job's message of humility. I want to rush past the cross to the resurrection. I want the Hollywood endings, the fairy tales corrupted to read, "And they all lived happily ever after."

What I have, in this mean time, are you. Can we bear the Christ for each other? Can we share the suffering and agony? Can we accept each other without being perfect? Hell, can we accept each other before we are even average or ok? Can we

share the little bits of hope, caring, and faith that we can muster up, give in to or dimly see? Can we love before we understand? Can we trust despite the evidence of our hurts? Can we trust after we feel manipulated or humiliated or when we have been manipulated or humiliated?

Can we follow Jesus into caring for the world even when we have little hope of being understood or appreciated, much less of being effective or successful? Jesus is my savior in part because he did not shut his eyes, did not turn aside from a path that ended, as expected, in pain and shame. Can we embody the same kind of caring and courage? Can we get by with less tact? Can we engage our conflicts with more caring and intentionality? Can we talk to each other before we are articulate, risk words that we will need to take back? Can we let other Seekers start from where they are rather than from where we want them to be? Can we start and restart before we are ready, before we are adequate, before we are comfortable. Can we start clumsily, knowing we will probably have a lot to confess and repent of later?

We have to risk such things or we will never be able to sustain looking at what we really do not want to see. If we let our caring expand, we will be ensnared in complexities, taken beyond our comfort zones. Nevertheless, if we shut our eyes and turn away we will be blinder than Bartimaeus and unable to ask for help. Our fears will be worse because we will forget their names. We will be less safe, not safer. Moreover, we will not be able to help each other at some of the places that most need help.

The bear is in my tent. Will you let the bear into your tent? Some of the bears are truly dangerous but, when we waltz with

them, we look less like prey.

Appendix to Spoken Sermon

The following rant is incomplete and not very well written. I do not have the time to shape it up and still get the sermon out in a timely manner. So read it if you will but realize that I understand the shortcomings in the writing.

So many things make me angry about the U.S. war on Iraq that I hardly know where to start. I will start with myself. I was in vocal opposition to the war, went to some of the rallies against the war, along with numerous other Seekers. However, it was not long before I began closing my attention to the war, skipping the articles that would help me understand what was going on. I was outraged that the war was touted as being fought to protect me from terrorism. I was angry that very few political leaders opposed the war and angry that the masses of people in the United States seemed to care so little, seemed so willing to be credulous or uncaring. Then I closed my eyes and slid into the masses myself. Now I am angry that I have so much to repent; I feel so guilty about not doing more, often not doing anything.

I am angry at the President and his team for not telling the truth about why they led the country into war. Sometimes I wonder if they truly knew themselves. Was it just about the oil? Were it just about profits for Halliburton and all the others who expected to raid the wealth of Iraq? Was it just about trying to make up for Bush Senior not going to Baghdad

when he had the chance, about a son trying to show his father how it should have been done, about a son getting even for a threatened assassination of his father? Was it about wanting glory as a wartime president, as a victorious president? Was it about thrill and adventure? Was it about embarrassment because they could not catch Osama bin Laden and somebody had to pay.

We may never know. Nevertheless, it sure as hell was not about weapons of mass destruction. There were not any and that is what the intelligence said. It was not about terrorism and Al Qaeda and that is what the intelligence said. It was not about democracy and nation building. Bush ran against that idea in his first presidential race. They tried to install some pets and when they were rejected, when it became clear that the pets were not all they were cracked up to be, then they had not a clue. They gave all the rebuilding money to Halliburton and cousins and the multinationals did not hire or work with local Iraqis. When they could not provide protection for the work of Halliburton, the work of non-profits, the work of the United Nations, the work of our allies, all those people went home or moved inside the big U.S. bases where they might as well have been on the moon.

Therefore, I am angry about how the war was marketed to the people of the United States. Yes. I mean "marketing" as a euphemism for intentional misdirection and distraction. In one of my favorite children's records a character call the Rock Man says, "You see what you want to see and you hear what you want to hear." The Rock Man reminds me that the fault in "marketing" lies not only with the speaker but also with the hearer. The "marketing" of the Iraq war could not have worked if the collective "we" of the United States people had not wanted to be misled.

We were frustrated and angry about the plane attacks in New York and on the Pentagon. We were frustrated and angry about the mishandling of the war in Afghanistan and the escape of Osama bin Laden. The hunger for revenge was one big part of our desire to see what we wanted to see. Saddam Hussein was an Islamic bad person and it did not matter, and according to the polls, still does not matter, that Saddam was an opponent of Al Qaeda.

However, our complicity, our eagerness to be deceived, goes deeper than that. There is more at stake than the revenge and machismo that we decry in others. We didn't want to remember, didn't want to confess, that we had all looked the other way when the United States helped to create Saddam Hussein, including helping him to develop poison gas capacities as part of building a big military capacity to serve as our proxy in fighting

the radical Islamic government in Iran. When Hussein and Khomeini were fighting each other, we were rooting for Hussein. He was secular and part of a secular political party and we thought that was good. What we did in helping Hussein was like what we did in helping the Taliban become a force, with other warlords, in destabilizing the Southern tier of the Soviet Union. The breakup of the Soviet Union was the key to protecting the supply of oil from the Mid East.

As it is turning out, I think I am even angrier about the incompetence than the duplicity of the Bush Administration. Just about everyone screwed up big time, starting from the top. Rumsfeld and Chaney had the reputation of old pros and I figured they would steer the president through this effort. However, they did not do the most elemental things. They did

not plan. They did not bring together the Pentagon, the State Department and the Intelligence Community to make a coordinated effort. They did not provide enough troops to occupy Iraq. They did not provide a unified command structure. They were very slow to listen, very slow to learn, and their slow improvements were always behind the curve of rising opposition. I cannot figure out which is worse, their incompetence or their lack of caring. Then they got embarrassed because there were no weapons of mass destruction, because they were not welcomed as liberators, because Halliburton could not rebuild Iraq, because the Iraqis were not fools and did not give all their assets away when they wrote their constitution.

Because of poor planning and limited troops, the military did not secure the conventional weapons in the bases they overran and that ended up supplying the later resistance. They did not secure the borders, which allowed a lot of opportunity for the resistance to organize and supply itself and bring in foreign fighters. Because they had no plan and lacked enough troops, they could not and did not take advantage of their quick victory against the Iraqi Army. They allowed looting instead of protecting the infrastructure already in existence. The people experienced chaos and crime, unemployment and random violence, and the U.S. did not understand why they were not happy with liberation.

It was not just the neo cons who were attracted by the "marketing" of democracy as a justification for the war in Iraq. For the neoconservatives the language of democracy is cover for the interests of the free rein of multinational corporations. We had no real plan for establishing democracy in Iraq but we did have a real plan for selling the Iraq oil reserves to the multinational corporations as well as other

Iraq assets.

Liberals liked the idea of establishing democracy to push back against Islamic fundamentalists, to help the Kurds and other minorities in Iraq that we had sold out following the Iraq war in the early 1990s. We liked the idea of rights for women and a generally more open society as found in some of the small Arabic states. We liked the idea of access to oil reserves that would make us less dependent on Saudi Arabia, a nation truly resistant to modern change.

A number of Seekers were present in the big "Stop the War" rally at that cold, cold day on the Mall. We had our say, were dismissed by the Administration, and gained the moral comfort of feeling we had done our part for the "right side" concerning the war.

I found myself so angry about the war that I had a hard time reading about what was going on. I was angry about the press coverage that covered the early stages of the fighting as if it were a grand crusade, a Super Bowl of success. I knew about the rumblings of early missteps after the sweep of U.S. forces to Baghdad but I was mostly focused on my angry righteousness about there being no weapons of mass destruction. I just could not attend to or keep track of all the ways we screwed up the occupation and turned victory into defeat.

On the one hand, part of me delighted in the failures of Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz. I am still so angry with them, and with the president who gave them their head, that it is hard for me to care about how much their continuous

unwillingness to learn from their mistakes has harmed Iraq and harmed the United States. On the other hand, I was and am disappointed that the leaders of Iraq could not take advantage of the chance they had to build a nation that they let old grievances and bad habits close out the difficult opportunities that did exist for a while.

I stopped reading the papers, did not read the other news sources. My compassion was burned out. My moral outrage was burned out. I even quit caring about my feelings of "I told you so." I felt disempowered. I was disempowered. The Administration was terrible and public opinion was tepidly going along. Democrats and Republicans in the Congress were pretty much sidelined as well. I was more than disempowered. I was and am disgusted.

It has been helpful to read the new critiques of the U.S. performance in Iraq. I am glad to have a clearer picture of the failures of the intelligence community, of the uniformed services, and especially the total fumbling stupidity of the Secretary of Defense and the crowd he runs with. It feels good to be little more engaged again.

Actually, it feels terrible to be a little more engaged again.