

The Thousandth Time

Text: Psalm 16; Mark 7:31-15

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I want us to take a summer stroll together with something that G. K. Chesterton once said. In my mind's eye I like to imagine a bit of a smile as he spoke, and a playful frolic in his eyes.

*You can look at something nine hundred and ninety-nine times,
and not perceive it at all;
but if you look for the thousandth time
you are in danger of seeing it - as if for the first time.*

It's a curious thought, and quite true, about human attentiveness. It exposes the fact that we can get so accustomed to the world around us that we don't even see it anymore, or we do so with eyes half-opened. You know what I mean. That which can be so familiar can become overly familiar and eventually fall to the fate of not being noticed at all.

But then, by grace or luck or a little bit of both, something catches our attention. It's like our minds slow and we turn a corner and a pause transcends our pace. And suddenly we see as we did not just moments before. Maybe it's because the light lands differently on whatever is before us, or a breeze awakens our senses, or a sound disrupts our movement, or maybe something more.

I officiated at a wedding last night at a vineyard down in Stonington. Though Pam was with me for this one, often on other such occasions she will ask, "what were the flowers like?" I reach back in my mind trying to remember the bridal party not even an hour before. "Flowers?" I query, (note the question mark!), "yes, there were flowers but I don't remember seeing them!"

Sometimes we can't see the forest for the trees. Other times, just as surely, we can't see the trees for the forest. But then, here and there, now and then, something happens to cause us to see.

Scripture speaks of this across her many pages. That's because the dilemma of blunted awareness, of sleepwalking through life, of missing all sorts of moments, is not only one of contemporary life.

You no doubt remember that Jesus spent a good bit of time reminding the people of his day - most especially his disciples - that the kingdom of God, the realm of the spirit, was not across the river or around the corner but around and within them all the time.

Or, Ezekiel, back in the day, who tried to get his contemporaries to pay attention to something burning with urgency as a prophetic call. "O my people, here is the word but you have ears and hear not; you have eyes and see not."

Or, closely following in the Psalms. "You have mouths that do not speak; eyes that do not see; ears that do not hear; noses that do not smell; and hands that do not feel." My goodness, how much we are still just like they were!

Or, Isaiah who speaks for God and says, "Behold I am doing a new thing." And then, aware that he wasn't getting through, dares to name it straight up: "Do you not perceive it? It's springing and popping and flowing all around, blossoms and water and life! Can you not see?"

It was a long time ago now. I remember a certain summer afternoon when our young family was on the New Jersey Shore. Karen, our youngest, was discovering the ocean for the first time. Apparently I had not reached my 999th glance yet because I was not seeing what was happening right before me.

She squealed with toddling gladness as she watched the ocean. "S'that?" she asked as she pointed toward the Atlantic. Barely glancing up from my book I simply said "water." "No, s'that?" Then she amped it up a notch as she turned up the volume too, "big bath!" Then a wave crashed. "Boom!" she shouted. I said, "No Kare, that's only a wave." I was doing my very best adult! And then she began to construct a sentence of her own as she strung all of the sensory evidence together, "Big bath boom! Pop pop's ocean! Big bath boom."

How could I ever be so blind as to simply call the awesome and mighty Atlantic "water" or refer to the majestic power of water rising and crashing as "only a wave."? How dull am I? Karen was inviting me, awakening me, to the thousandth glance! But it's not always like that for us, is it? Sometimes we don't see the forest for the trees, or the trees for the forest.

Or let's run it deeper. Because this truth around seeing and not seeing, hearing and not hearing, perceiving some things but not others, is so much the story of life. And sometimes we need a child to embarrass us out of our doldrums, as with Karen and her "big bath boom!" Other times we need something more powerful.

There once was a man who was unable to hear or to speak. His eardrums received sound waves but he could not make sense of them; he uttered noise but there was no shape to his sounds.

Those who loved and cared for him believed that if Jesus would touch him, he would be made well. Curiously, Jesus took him aside – which is not often a part of the sequence of the healing stories of the master. It's as if they had their own moment alone. He put his fingers to the man's ears and touched the man's tongue with spittle. Then he glanced toward the heavens and sighed a prayer of one word: "Ephphatha!" which in Aramaic means, "be opened!" And immediately the man's ears and tongue and eyes were released and he was free.

Take that story as you will but don't pass it by because sometimes it takes more than we have within ourselves all alone to open our eyes or ears or mouth. Sometimes such openness comes from within and other times it comes from Someone or something more. Sometimes it takes a prayer, as in that word whispered. Sometimes it takes others who bring us to healing - like the touch of Jesus.

I'll let it rest with this. The best of spirituality, the best of life, the best of God, the best of religion, the best of Jesus all in some way invite us to the fullness of life. They invite us to open our eyes and breath the air and see what's around us and to live the thousandth glance.

And we have, each and all, this second half of the summer to yet awaken. To see the people in our lives for all of their silliness and sainthood; to hear the many others around us and perceive the cries of human need; to taste salt-air and salty-waves and salt-water taffy; to feel the breeze and watch the trees; to listen to a lonely story and offer a friendly heart.

May our summer-time be blessed by such rich awareness. May we delight in the big bath boom of our dreams. And may the wide expanse of God's gift finally appear for us, each and all, in the thousandth glance, as if for the very first time. Amen.

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