

## *Seeing but Not Seeing*

Luke 10:25-37

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It's been hard to turn on the news over the past two weeks without hearing about the scandal at Penn State. I heard someone say that it's because the media are obsessed with sex. Maybe that adds to the creepiness of watching Jerry Sandusky defend his showers, but I don't think that's what the story is really about. The scandal is not about sex; it's about silence. The mystery is not why a pedophile would do what a pedophile does; the mystery is why no one *else* did anything *about* it.

David Brooks had a column in the *New York Times* this week about our feeling of superiority. Everyone condemns those who did not do enough to protect children, based on the assumption that if we had been in Joe Paterno's shoes or Mike McQueary's shoes we would have behaved better. But we ought to know enough about human nature to know that we cannot be sure of that. Christians stood by in Nazi Germany. Christians stood by during the genocide in Rwanda. We have all seen videos of victims being beaten by bullies or criminals, and bystanders do nothing.

Jesus' parable is at least partly about this: it is a story about good people who do nothing. The story is being told to the Pharisees and scribes—the religious people, the good guys in their society. When we hear the story as good church people we hear it the same way as the Pharisees did. Here is what Jesus says: when someone is hurt, the good people, the church people walk on by. They see the wounded man, but they do not see.

Perhaps they suffer from what psychologists call the Normalcy Bias, which allows us when we see something profoundly shocking pretend to ourselves that everything is normal. Perhaps they suffer from Motivated Blindness, in which people register the presence of something they don't want to see, but on a subconscious level so that their eyes literally do not move over to the thing they do not wish to see. Perhaps they just love something else more than they love this neighbor: they love the Temple, they love their religious duties, they love their jobs, they love being on time.

One of my psychology professors at Princeton University in the 70's conducted an experiment on Princeton Seminary students. These ministers in training were given some papers to take to another building on the campus. Along the way the professor had planted an actor dressed as a homeless man with a terrible cough as if he had pneumonia. The test was to see if seminary students would stop to help. If they were told that they were almost late in making the delivery, they never stopped. If time was not an issue, some did. A lot of us love being seen as responsible more than we love victims.

We can make excuses for the priest and the Levite on the road to Jericho. It may be that they were afraid of being robbed themselves. Perhaps they thought the body was trap set by robbers. It may be that they did not want to become ritually unclean by touching a dead body and thus unable to perform their religious duties. But clearly Jesus isn't buying any of that.

The story is about love, the command to love. The lawyer asks Jesus, "Who *is* my neighbor?" In other words, "Who am I *obligated* to love?" The people at Penn State ask the question, "Who is *obligated* to report?" It's not about obligation; it's about love. What is needed

is not a clear sense of the rules. What is needed is compassion. Jesus says to the religionists, "Learn what the scripture means when it says, 'I desire compassion and not sacrifice.'" What God wants, and what Jesus demonstrates, is a heart that goes out to victims. The priest and Levite saw and turned away, because they did not see with their hearts. The rich man saw the beggar Lazarus on his doorstep, but he did not see him as a person. Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, sheep without a shepherd.

When we see a victim of sexual abuse, our first question should not be what our legal obligations are. Our first question should be "How can I show love?" How can I protect a little one from harm? Here is the reality: one in three girls in this country is sexually molested before she reaches the age of eighteen; one in seven boys is sexually molested as a minor. They are usually molested by family members, and sometimes by trusted persons in authority. It is very rare that they are molested by strangers. Most pedophiles are heterosexual. They look just like everyone else, just like Jerry Sandusky, the caring coach, just a big kid, kind of like everyone's favorite uncle.

There are people within our congregation who were sexually abused as children. Some of you have faced it and dealt with it in therapy; some of you have pushed it out of your awareness. The message of the church is first that this is a safe place; we will not let someone abuse you; we will not participate in keeping a secret; we will love you and help you heal. But the message of the gospel is also that you do not need to be ashamed: there is nothing wrong with you. But there is a good chance that there is someone in our congregation who has been a perpetrator of abuse at some point. To them the church's message is that we do not keep secrets. We do not value privacy or confidentiality so highly that we will not act to protect future victims. God loves you, too, and we want to help you to heal, but we will not allow you to harm again.

But there are many more in this room who have been bystanders. We saw that something was wrong but we chose not to see. We pushed it aside. We walked on the other side of the road when we saw that a child could not make direct eye contact or was acting sexualized at a very young age. It was the bystanders who allowed Jerry Sandusky to continue his crimes for years. It is bystanders who decide that what goes on behind closed doors in a private home is none of their business. It is bystanders who make bullying possible.

The social psychologists call this "bystander silence." We could also call it bystander blindness or bystander paralysis. It happens not just with bullies but when the unthinkable happens and someone we know is guilty of a crime against a child. We decide that we don't want to take sides. Yeah, I've heard that. In the name of fairness to both sides of the family, we let it go on.

I heard a sermon preached last Sunday at the Nittany Bible Church near Penn State. The pastor, Joe Rose, is a former Penn State football player, who was trying to process what was going on. This scandal is a crisis for the whole community. He said that he had been in conversations in which people said they were worried about what would happen to the value of their Penn State degrees. They were worried about what would happen to the football program. They were worried about what would happen to their businesses. The pastor's response to that was one word: Really? *Really??* That's what you're worried about? My question is "What will happen to those boys?"

I imagine you can understand what it's like to be a part of a community that would rather not talk about the dark side. If we see it, we just pretend we don't see it. Well, we don't want to take sides. Well, we don't want to hurt the economy or Block Island's image.

Obviously the response to talking openly about the problems of the mentally ill on the island and the lack of services is a case in point. We don't want to see the guy in the ditch. We don't want to face the possibility that he is there because the system has made no provision for him at all—the medical center system, the town government which has no social worker, the state community mental health system which will not send anyone to the island. But worse than that, we don't want to see the reality of mental illness period, to face the truth that one in four of us really needs treatment.

We all know that the real elephant in the room is drinking. God help us if we talk about *that*. A young man dies in an accident after a beach party where everyone was drinking and he is mourned by his peers with night after night of drinking until dawn. No one is going to say anything for fear of hurting someone. No one takes a step to prevent another victim of the same social pattern. The police chief holds the toxicology report as a deep secret, like so many other secrets. What if we talked about the secrets? What would it do to the image of the island? If we enforced the law, what would it do to our businesses? We think it outrageous that State College would chose to ignore the problem, but we are bystanders ourselves. Does anyone doubt that at least a third of the adults on the island have either a mental health issue or a substance abuse problem? Can bystander silence be the response Jesus wants?

The church needs to say: there is nothing to be ashamed of. This is not a moral problem; it's a sickness like diabetes or high blood pressure or Lyme disease. The odds are that there are genetic factors or you were the victim of abuse, or both. People don't choose to be bipolar or schizophrenic or depressed. People don't choose to be alcoholics. They just need treatment. The moral problem lies not with the people who have symptoms of disease. The moral problem lies with those who conspire to deny it or to shame the victims.

Thursday Rosalynn Carter spoke to the New Baptist Covenant gathering in Atlanta on the subject of mental illness as a moral issue for churches. Baptists have been very concerned about physical illness over the years—sending missionary doctors, building hospitals, praying for the sick. But our attitude toward the mentally ill has been marked by neglect, she said. Churches largely remain “bastions of exclusion” for people with mental illness and their families. I hope that is not true of us. I don't think it is. But I think Mrs. Carter is right when she says, “The single most damaging fact in the life of anyone dealing with mental illness is the *stigma* that alienates and isolates.” That's why I am so glad that Harbor Church has taken a stand against letting island institutions stigmatize people of the basis of a diagnosis or isolate them because they showed symptoms of mental illness at some point. No one should be punished for the symptoms of an illness.

I want to tell you a story about how God works in strange ways. In October, you will recall, I was feeling hammered by critics of the Mental Health Task Force and my own position about one man's exclusion. I was pretty discouraged about making any progress. One of you send me a link to an article about Rhode Island being the #1 state in the union in mental illness, and I decided to use that as a way to try to refocus the conversation on what we were trying to do. Against advice I got from others of you, I wrote a letter to the paper. I got a call from Mike Brownstein saying he'd like to help. He was about to leave the island for the winter, but he sought me out at the Roll Call Dinner and introduced himself. Mike is a big deal medical researcher who was with NIH and has published hundreds of papers, but we had an instant rapport. When he got home he sent me the first chapter of a novel he wrote, and I sent him a poem about my mother's mental illness.

But here's the amazing part: within 24 hours after he got home, Mike had contacted the head of the National Institute of Mental Health, who had put him in contact with the Chair of Psychiatry at Brown, Steve Rasmussen, who is also medical director at Butler Hospital. This past Monday I went to meet with Steve in person, and he had a three-part plan: begin a telemedicine program here at the church using Skype to allow consults with psychiatrists in their training program at Brown, hire an on-island case manager part-time to work with the severe cases, and send residents and supervisors to the island in the summer for face-to-face consults. After a flurry of emails on Tuesday, by Wednesday Mike Brownstein had put in the mail a check for \$2000 to pay for the computer and large monitor for Skype, and a check for \$20,000 to pay for the first two years of salary for the case manager.

That, friends, is a miracle. And I don't think it's a coincidence that God looked down on me when I was feeling beat up—as in the story I told you two weeks ago—and suddenly made an angel of encouragement appear at the Roll Call Dinner. Here's the lesson: if we stand for the victims, God will stand with us, because he cares about the weak and the oppressed. If you want to see God work, get on the side of the road where the victims are.