

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC  
Danvers, MA  
Rev. Kevin M Smith  
March 18, 2108  
John 12:30-40

### *The Forest for the Trees*

The Old English Dictionary has the phrase “*Plentie is nodeintie, ye see not your owne ease. I see, ye can not see the wood for trees.*” (—Oxford English Dictionary) This saying, “you can’t see the forest for the trees dates back to the sixteenth century.” I’m guessing, though, that this phenomena goes back much further than that century. I’m sure people have been looking at sights or signs that are fairly obvious if they could only stop focusing on the small details, ideas, events, platitudes, or beliefs that get in their way of seeing the whole picture. There are times, too, when our fears of all the little roadblocks before us keep us from pursuing big solutions to whatever problem lies before us.

There are a number of instances in the Bible when people are blind to what should have been so obvious. Take the religious folks who wanted to know when the kingdom of God would come. Way too often we get up in stories that we learned from someone else’s viewpoint when we were younger, perhaps from parents or religious teachers. Or, perhaps the religious organization they decided to make their home held certain beliefs that you had to adopt to be accepted into the fold. Jesus told the folks who wanted to know when the kingdom of God would come, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 17:20-21) Or, take the time Jesus was walking along with his disciples and he was telling them about how bad things were going to get for him and even predicting his own death. Peter wouldn’t stand for it and took Jesus aside to rebuke him and we all know how Jesus responded to Peter, “Get behind me Satan.” (Matthew 16:21-23) How could Peter not see, after spending years with Jesus, after hearing people refer to Jesus as the new Messiah or a new king that living in Roman occupied territory that Jesus life would not be in danger?

I read this story about a woman who was a middle school teacher for years and she enjoyed her work, but there was something about it that was just not as fulfilling to her life that she wanted. This woman of faith felt a nagging sense of something else calling her but she was so mired in the day-to-day details of her life that she wouldn’t give the sense of call much time or just stayed caught up in

the minutia of her daily living. After some time, she began to get very curious about a hobby of hers that gave her pleasure...her sewing.

After doing a lot of soul-searching, praying, and talking with her spouse and others she got up the courage to actually quit her job. She started researching the art and skill of sewing and it wasn't too long that she began to feel called to use her newly enhanced skills to help people. Her passion for sewing and providing for others lit a flame in her heart. She began to think that just sewing clothes for her family though was not enough. She started selling clothes to others and it wasn't too long that word began to spread about the wonderful work she did. But, still that success seemed somewhat hollow, too, and she felt God speaking to heart to better use her talent for really helping heal the world. She got the idea to help others and began to give her profits to an organization called "Little Dresses for Africa."

Her sense of fulfillment and joy of answering God's call for her life grew and continues to do so. Through her faith and having the courage to look at the big picture and arc of her life with God rather than getting caught up in all the little details of leaving her long-time job, being fearful of the little barriers in her way, learning a new skill, and fearing what it would take to start her own business, she was able to thrive and hear God's call to help heal the world with her new found passion. She was also blessed, of course, with a supportive family who was not focused on the material things in life and who had enough financial stability to support her. Still, it was all such a big risk that had she focused on the trees of the forest rather than the passionate calling for her from God to look at the bigger picture, the more profound calling for her personally.

In our scripture passage this morning Jesus is teaching his disciples and some Greek folks who wanted to see and listen to Jesus. Jesus is foretelling, once again how things were proceeding and how tough times were coming for him and them. Of course, because what the disciples had believed for so long about the Messiah wasn't matching this vision of Jesus, they were blinded to God doing a new thing in their lives. He tells them,

"For a brief time still, the light is among you. Walk by the light you have so darkness doesn't destroy you. If you walk in darkness, you don't know where you're going. As you have the light, believe in the light. Then the light will be within you, and shining through your lives. You'll be children of light."

In other worlds don't get caught up in all the darkness and obscurity of just focusing on the trees (or the fears, or the platitudes) and miss the big picture of

what God is doing here through him and through them. We heard further from the Gospel that “all these God-signs he had given them and they still didn’t get it, still wouldn’t trust him. This proved that the prophet Isaiah was right. Isaiah said:

*Their eyes are blinded/their hearts are hardened/So that they wouldn’t see with their eyes/and perceive with their hearts/And turn to me, God/so I could heal them. (John 12:35-40)*

Too many people in this day read the sections, or passages, or even phrases of the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments, and get caught up in and use specific phrases or platitudes, often taken out of context, to hammer people’s ideas that they disagree with or do not match with their beliefs handed down by authorities. But they miss the larger arc of the message of the Bible that we serve and worship a God who creates, nurtures with love, perhaps tough love sometimes, but who wants to heal the world and heal us and who needs our help as people of faith to love our neighbors no matter who they are.

My friends, may we not get mired in rigid, unyielding actions or beliefs, and learn to listen to each other beyond the single trees before us and begin to see the big picture of how we can take our common hopes, dreams, and goals to love one another and heal a broken world. May we not be blind or deaf to the larger work God is calling us to do. Amen.