

Don't just look: see
Matthew 15:21-28
August 17, 2014

Our daughter Brigitta has been in Abu Dhabi for ten days now.

Abu Dhabi -- one of those place names that when you say it, people aren't convinced that you aren't making it up.

"Abu Dhabi?" said the guy at the Verizon store. "For real?"

Isn't that that cartoon place?"

"Cartoon place?" we said.

"Yeah," he said, " you know, Garfield the Cat,

that's where he always threatens to send Nermal. Abu Dhabi."

"It's like Timbuktu", one friend said to us. "You think it's not real, but it is."

It is. Indeed. Brigitta is there, so I can tell you for sure that it's real.

And it's hot. It's real hot. 111 degrees a couple days ago.

Tank top and shorts all day kind of weather.

Only -- not so fast.

The United Arab Emirates have a pretty strict dress code, and for women, tank top and shorts are not happening.

Shoulders covered, knees covered, respectful dress.

Brigitta mournfully left all her hot-weather clothes stuffed in drawers, and packed shirts with sleeves, long skirts.

Hey, David pointed out to her, at least they're not requiring full burqa.

That would be hot.

Good point, said Brigitta, brightening up a bit.

And hopefully she's remembering to be thankful, over there in her 111 degrees.

All of which took me back to the first time I met, truly met, burqa-clad women.

I don't mean passed by on the street or in an airport, but friend to friend.

It was a hot, really hot day in Hyderabad, India, on one of my first trips.

I was at one of the schools we were supporting,

and the front gate swung open, and in walked two women completely covered in black, full burqas, small slits in the fabric for their eyes.

And without even realizing I was doing it,

as they came toward me in their black robes

I found myself immediately making assumptions:
 assumptions that said 'I have little in common with these women':
 assumptions that said they are ultra religious, submissive, serious, quiet.

And then, and then, they peeled off their burqas.
 Once the gate had swung shut, off came the robes,
 and there they were: two of our youngest teachers,
 dressed exuberantly in riotous color,
 laughing at me for not recognizing them,
 embracing me with hugs, chattering away,
 pulling their books out of their bags and getting ready to teach their classes --
 science and history.

Two women I knew to be fun, lively, and quite strong-minded.
 The robes -- as they are meant to do -- had kept me from seeing them --
 but seeing them, finally seeing them,
 there they truly were: friends, women, sisters. Sisters.

In the story that Sarah read to you, the woman Jesus encounters isn't wearing a burqa,
 there is nothing draped over her to hide her true self from Jesus.
 But there might as well be.
 For all that Jesus sees of her, there might as well be.
 Because the truth is -- he doesn't see her.
 He doesn't really see her. At least, not at first.

The story is this:
 Jesus and his disciples are a good ways from home,
 far from their familiar stomping-places in Galilee;
 they're passing through the cities of Tyre and Sidon,
 Canaanite cities, different faith, different folks.
 They weren't really figuring on spending time there;
 they were really just on the way to Jerusalem,
 center of *their* faith.
 And then this woman turns up.
 This Canaanite woman, not Jewish like them, not like them at all.
 And she's begging for help.
 And Jesus, who surely never said no to anyone,
 who never turned away from someone needing healing,
 says no to her, and turns away.

And she begs some more, begs for help not for her but for her sick daughter.

And Jesus says -- these are awful words he says --

he says "I can't help you. I was sent to help the lost sheep of Israel."

And that's not the worst, because then he says "you can't expect me to take bread meant for God's children and toss it to dogs."

Dogs?

That's how he looks at her? Pagan? Beggar? Dog?

If you look over our sermons for the past ten years or so,

David and I have preached on this passage probably more than any other.

Over and over.

Why on earth, you might ask.

Why on earth preach this passage where our Savior, our Lord,
looks at a woman desperate for help and calls her unworthy.

Why?

Because of what happens next.

"Yes, Lord," she says, "but even the dogs get the crumbs under the table."

And then, and then, he sees her.

He truly, truly sees her.

It's like everything that had been keeping her veiled from his sight is stripped away --

all the centuries of prejudice, all the assumptions,

everything he and his people had ever heard from childhood

about Canaanites, about pagans, about women.

It disappears.

He sees her.

"Oh, how powerful is your faith," he says, and I picture him moved to tears.

"How great is your faith," he says. "Your daughter is healed," he says.

David and I preach this because of that moment.

That moment when Jesus, when Christ himself, is startled into seeing
what he had not seen.

That moment when he hears her truly, sees her completely.

Because what that says to us, what that must say to all of us,

is that to be Christlike - to follow this man --

is to open our eyes to see completely.

To see as Christ saw in that moment:

past barriers, past ancient prejudices, past assumptions.

To see. Really to see each other.

There has been a lot of pain coming out of Ferguson, Missouri this week, a lot of hurt and anger that runs far deeper than one event, one week. And surely at the center of it all is the question of how we see one another, how we, as people sharing one country and God's world, see one another. At the heart of it is a mother in profound grief, who *saw* in Mike Brown the son whom she cherished, a young man she'd coaxed through high school and was sending to college. A young man whom another person saw as a threat, for reasons we are still trying to fathom ... and therefore shot -- which is what every mother of a young man of color fears most. (that I can tell you firsthand). And so now: a country wrestling with how to understand what has happened ... and at the heart of it: how do we see one another, how do we see past what veils our sight, how do we see past the murkiness of history and hurt and prejudice and truly see one another as completely and with as much understanding as Jesus finally saw that woman. We are overwhelmed right now, from every corner, with assumptions and angers that blind us. How do we see our way to healing? How do we see each other completely?

In this strange and confusing week, there was another sorrow to rock us back on our heels. Some of us went back as far as 'Happy Days' with Robin Williams, still others, our kids included, remembered the passionate teacher of Dead Poets' Society, the therapist who coaxed Matt Damon to healing in Good Will Hunting. All of us knew Robin Williams as a brilliant comic, who could capture and mimic a seemingly endless procession of personalities, his voice changing ludicrously, reducing us to helpless tears of laughter.

And what this story, this grief, has to do with the other, what Robin Williams and Ferguson have to do with each other and with Christ, is this -- I believe that what people adored in Robin Williams and grieve most was his capacity truly to see, truly to see and comprehend the people around him. He could capture the personalities around him

because he got them, he saw, he was deeply immersed in life, in people.
But not just for comic effect.
He saw, and then he felt, and then he acted -- with acts of compassion.

One of the sweet stories that came out of this week,
as people shared their memories,
was a tale told by a fellow comic, Norm Macdonald.
It was from when he was appearing on Letterman for the first time,
and had just found out he would be following Robin Williams.
In his dressing room, panicking, he called a friend and told him what he'd just found out: that he
would have to follow the world's funniest man.
Right then, the door flew open -- and there was Robin Williams, who had overheard him,
and could see immediately how truly terrified he was.
So Robin Williams went into full fledged comic mania:
announced that he was a tailor who had been sent to adjust his clothes;
he took Macdonald's measurements, tied his tie,
spoke mostly Yiddish the whole time,
until Macdonald was hysterical with laughter and had forgotten his fear.
And then Williams left.

That was just one of many stories,
of people whom he had noticed, truly seen.
There was the young boy, Rudy, 8 years old, a double amputee,
whom Robin noticed at a fundraiser for challenged athletes.
Rudy, not knowing what a celebrity he was talking to, asked Robin Williams if wanted to be on his
relay team,
and together they were a team for years to come.

And there were so many trips overseas to visit our soldiers far from home;
so many pictures posted online this week of Robin Williams sitting by a bedside and listening,
standing with arms around soldiers and laughing hysterically,
standing on a stage making hundreds of young soldiers forget for a moment how homesick they
were.
This week, it wasn't just that a funny guy had died.
It was that we lost someone who really *got* us --
who saw people completely, warts and all, and captured who they were,
who saw the loneliness of a soldier
or the nervousness of a fellow actor

or the longing of a kid who just wanted to be like the other athletes.
Robin Williams was someone who saw.
And we grieved that loss this week.

And because of how death came to him,
we also this week were reminded deeply and profoundly
of how important it is for *us* to see the people around us completely.
How important it is for us to watch for, to see, those who are carrying burdens that have become too
heavy for them to carry alone.
How absolutely essential it is for us to see others with clarity, to see beneath surfaces to where hurt
runs deep.
To see, to see, and by our seeing to bring healing.

By our seeing to bring healing.

On that hot, hot day in Hyderabad India years ago,
I didn't see my friends, my sisters, brave and bright women
until the veils they were wearing were dropped,
until we were no longer separated by what had deceived my eyes.

On that hot day in Sidon long ago,
Jesus, Jesus himself, didn't see the woman right in front of him,
until she made him look, made him see her for who she was:
child of God,
until the veils of ancient prejudices had been dropped,
until neither was blinded any more.
In that seeing was healing -- hers and his,
Canaanite woman and Jewish rabbi.

What has happened in Ferguson calls us, reminds us, of how much work is yet to be done truly to
see each other,
to see what veils still hang between us,
what blindnesses each one of us walks around with.
We are called not just to look, to stare, but to see --
and in our seeing to find healing.

And then there is Robin Williams,
whose lasting gift to us will be not only the laughter that still echoes in his absence,

but a life that showed us the power of truly seeing,
and the gift that it is to be seen and understood.
Who reminds us now, from God's own heaven,
of the need to see each other's lives with utter clarity, and deepest compassion
and in that seeing to bring healing.

Be thou our vision, loving God. Be thou our vision. Amen.