

John 1: 43-51 "Come and See" Rev. Janet Chapman 1/14/2018

Today, I stand before you very aware of sounds that have gone unheard in years past in my life, and learning to gage the volume of my voice which seems so much louder than before. It is a little unnerving as I rely so much on my voice, my hearing, to do what I do. You see, Friday afternoon I received hearing aids for the first time and found myself tuning into sounds that had escaped me or I had overlooked – sounds like doors squeaking, papers crinkling, birds chirping, clocks ticking, and even the brisk tapping of my fingers on the keyboard. Over the last 5 years, I have come to understand more completely what folks say about your other senses taking up the slack when one sense, like hearing or vision, grows weaker. I had recently grown more keenly aware of how people's lips moved to form words and even found myself studying the shapes of lips. I now realize this had to do with trying to discern more accurately what was being said. As my hearing grew worse, my observation of how words were spoken grew stronger. Now that the strain is relieved, I realize the experience has made me more grateful for the gifts of vision and hearing. I have also been reminded that sight and sound can bombard us with such velocity every day that it is all too easy to take them for granted.

I read about a new restaurant experience that builds upon the importance of appreciating our senses by depriving customers of their sight and encouraging them to rely on the other sense to guide them through a meal. It got started through the efforts of a blind Swiss pastor who routinely blindfolded his dinner guests recognizing that by doing so, they paid more attention to their food and listened better to one another. The Opaque restaurant group took this Swiss notion and expanded it to restaurants in Santa Monica, Paris, Montreal, Tel Aviv, and San Francisco, although the latter recently closed. The basic routine in all these places is the same. First diners are taken to a softly lit lounge where they check their belongings and place

their orders from a fixed menu. Then a blind host guides them to their seats in the pitch black dining room, where they can hear all the usual sounds of a busy restaurant without seeing who is making them. In Zurich, waiters wear bells on their shoes; in Paris, every dropped fork is met with giggles; in Santa Monica, patrons learn to pour their wine by slipping one finger inside their wine glass and tipping the bottle until they feel wine on their fingertip. Their server teaches them to receive their dishes at the corners of their tables and to pass them to one another at the same point. Once their plates are in front of them, the server coaches them on where to find their food. Grilled salmon at 12 o'clock, sir, roasted potatoes at nine o'clock, madam, and snap peas at three. Most diners have posted positive reviews and some hints for those who will follow. Some advise wearing black if you are going anywhere else afterwards because of the mess you make on your clothes. Nick K. offered another solution. "When the first course came out, I took my shirt off; after all, why not? No one could see me. I considered taking my pants off too, but I worried I would lose them in the dark. Regardless, I ate without a shirt for the entire meal and it was great."

A similar idea was the brain child of Andreas Heinecke who noticed how sighted people treated the blind – with everything from pity and fear to subtle contempt. Guided by a quotation from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber which says, "The only way to learn is through encounter," Heinecke created a physical experience of darkness that would allow sighted and blind people to change places. A traveling exhibit called "Dialogue in the Dark" was the result, where sighted people are led through complete darkness by a blind guide. Barbara Brown Taylor tells of the experience in her book, "Learning to Walk in the Dark." For an hour, she did her best to follow her guide Dolores's voice, though it didn't prevent her from running

into walls, missing doorways, stepping on other people's heels, and tripping over her own cane provided to each participant. Once she missed the step down at the end of a bridge and landed hard against the back of the person in front of her. She could only tell he was taller than her and his shirt smelled clean – she didn't know if he was old or young, white or black, pleasant to look at or not. There was no body language for her to read, no visual date to help her form judgments about who he was or what he was like. It was unexpectedly refreshing, like being at party when the lights go out. The normal rules of polite social interaction were suspended. Furthermore, he could not see her any better than she could see him, which meant she was excused from his judgements of her as well. Throughout the exhibit, Dolores would explain what sounds they were hearing or sights they were missing as they journeyed on. Dolores encouraged the participants to use their hands to touch soft and rough items, their noses to smell different foods, and their ears to hear which way she was guiding them. I thought of this experience as the audiologist worked with me Friday, trying to get the sound just right in my ears, making sure I could tell with my eyes closed from which part of the room she was speaking. This was something I couldn't have done before. I was grateful for the audiologist as I imagine Taylor was grateful to her guide and those around her. Additionally, Taylor remarked how blindness how affected the distance between her and her other comrades. Touching was inevitable; apologies were redundant; no one was embarrassed to be dependent on each other. Since no one could see for sure who was black or white, young or old, their exchanges were free of any ideas previously had about those identity markers. Maybe it was what Martin Luther King dreamed of before there was such a name, but one day there would be an Opaque church where we could learn to give up one kind of vision in hope of another. Instead of

wearing name tags, we would touch each other's faces. Instead of looking around to see who is there, we could learn to listen for each other's voices, we would reach out to hold each other's hands, we would find each other as we truly are and guide each other to become what God has called us to be. What a dream that would be!

In our scripture this morning, Jesus finds Philip and Philip finds Nathanael, and we get the idea that no one is embarrassed to be guided or found. Upon hearing that the one in whom Moses and the prophets taught has been found, and he is from Nazareth, Nathanael does ask how that can be? At this moment, Nathanael is still very much couched in society's expectations – Nazareth is nowhere, Nazareth is nothing, a Nazarean is a nobody. It is like the first week I arrived from Kansas City to Selma. One of the folks jokingly asked me the same thing Presidential candidate Harry Truman's opponents asked him, "How can anything good come out of Kansas City?" The place of one's upbringing doesn't tell the whole story. Nathanael doesn't know the whole story yet, yet he has no malice in his inquiry, he just hasn't learned through any encounters with Jesus. As Nathanael approaches Jesus, Jesus' vision is especially clear as he discerns Nathanael to be without guile. In other words, here is one who would be a wonderful friend, a great guide to follow even in the dark, but a horrible poker player. He is surprised at Jesus' summation of his character and asks where Jesus saw him, how does Jesus know him? For the Gospel of John, this is a crucial question which gets to the heart of how the Gospel wants to introduce and portray Jesus' actions. Jesus can read people's hearts, he was active at the beginning of creation and is the light that illumines every person – Jesus not only gives each person light; he sees each person in his or her true light. Jesus is the One who makes the blind to see and the deaf to hear. He is the One who opens the door to

abundant life as God created it to be lived for all of us. Nathanael experiences this in his encounter with Jesus – all because he accepts Philip’s invitation to come and see.

At the conclusion of Barbara Taylor’s experience with darkness, having removed their blindfolds, the group she was with stepped out from the exhibit into the brightly lit streets. She writes that it was like seeing people you had slept next to in a gym during a power outage – people who knew that you snored or talked in your sleep without knowing anything else about you. Appearances restored, they all stole looks at each other and said their farewells without meeting each other’s eyes. As Barbara was retrieving her things, she looked up to see an African American woman with milky eyes come through the door, sweeping her cane in front of her. “Good night, Dolores,” the receptionist said. “See you tomorrow,” Dolores said. Taylor realized as she watched her trusted guide walk away that she didn’t know what darkness means to someone who is blind, but she was beginning to understand that “light” has as many meanings as “dark.” There are some forms of light that transcend both waves and particles – it can illuminate the night without turning on the lights, becoming apparent to those who have learned to rely on senses other than sight to show them what is real. It is the light the mystics see when they meditate during the night hours, and in the morning, they pick up their pens to write down their revelations. It is akin to listening with more than just your ears, and it is made visible with more than just your eyes. It is the Light which lives within us, having encountered God and striving to live as Jesus’ followers. So that when someone asks you, “How can anything good come out of _____?” ... you fill in the blank, you can answer with gratitude the words of one who has clearly seen and heard a new way, “Come and see, my friend, come and see.”