

Opening Our Eyes **Luke 4:14-21**

His name was Moses. He was one of the most incredible musicians my young ears had ever heard. Moses had gone to seminary with my mother at Vanderbilt, was one of the pastors ministering to the congregation at Edgehill United Methodist Church in Nashville, and his ability to play the electric guitar and sing notes of spirituals introduced me to new ways of feeling your soul connect to the Almighty God. I wasn't the only one, he was a legitimate recording artist in Nashville. But, Moses was my friend, and I thought nothing of asking mom to have him come and play a concert for me and my friends, and our church in Kingston Springs. After all, who could imagine a better birthday party for an 8 year old. And he came, because he loved our family and he adored me. We set up the back yard with folding chairs and blankets. It was an incredible concert, exactly what my heart dreamed of. The next day, there was a cross burning in our front yard. The Ku Klux Klan did not approve. That was 1990. My eyes were a little more opened.

His name was James. He showed our young college group around Johannesburg, South Africa where we saw before our eyes the disparity between rich and poor. The shantytown where hundreds of thousands lived and we played kickball in the street, and the homes with fences around them with barbed wire to prevent squatters from finding their new home on your front lawn. We were there to learn about the legal system in South Africa. The year was 2002, not even 10 years since the system of apartheid, which means apartness, was ended. That system divided people into racial groups: prioritizing land, wealth, healthcare, and voting rights for whites. We learned about the gaps in education, wealth, and healthcare, based solely on skin color. The attorneys and social workers we met told us stories that broke our hearts, and the children and teenagers we met were not so different than we were with hopes and dreams for their futures that they would likely never see. Our eyes were a little more opened.

Her name was Zaida. Zaida took our group of Evangelical leaders from Washington, DC around Morocco, to the palace where we met with the Prime Minister, to the markets of Marrakesh where we smelled the most fantastic aromas and ate incredible foods, to a house church, where we sat with Moroccan men and women who spoke of having to hide their Christian

faith. In this Islamic nation, to be Moroccan was to be Muslim, and while religious diversity was tolerated if you were from another country living in Morocco, citizens had to prove their loyalty to the prince through religious practice. The persons in that room spoke of gathering late in the evening by candlelight to pray and sing hymns, sharing communion, and not being able to talk about it. One had been followed and arrested, another had their passport confiscated. As we met, the windows were covered, and someone kept lookout at the door. My eyes were a little more opened.

His name was Adrian. He was a loud-mouthed joker who seemed to know everyone on campus. He worked hard in the cafeteria, but he seemed to have more fun than anyone joking around with all the basketball players and football players, professors, and well everyone. When we started going bowling as friends, it was mostly so that I could knock him down a few pegs because clearly by years of bowling as a family at least once every six months was good practice. We started dating, and before long, I got a phone call from one of my family members who warned me about being too serious. He was “the wrong kind.” Forcing the issue just a bit, I clarified that he was a Christian, which was met with – “but I mean, the wrong color, Carol. It’s fine that you’re having fun, but what will people think. How will this affect your children, should you ever have any.” Well, I hope that the parenting we are able to provide will overcome any prejudice and hatred they encounter. Yet, the looks we got, holding hands walking around the grocery store or even laughing over a meal at waffle house did not go unnoticed. We were forbidden by Adrian’s mom to travel to certain parts of Tennessee after dark. Her eyes had been opened a lifetime earlier. My eyes were a little more opened.

Her name was Lupe. She was a strong Guatemalan woman. She had grown up experiencing the men – young and old alike - of her village be “disappeared,” either they would be recruited to fight in the army, or they would be suspected of being too strong and be murdered. The women who were left found ways of banding together to protect each other, provide for their families with practically nothing. Lupe had fallen in love with an American radical who had come to learn about Guatemalan history and they had founded an organization that matched the needs of the indigenous Mayan peoples with the goodwill of churches in America. She taught our youth group the importance of working alongside the people of the community, taking time to learn their names and their story, as we built stoves in this little village. Our youth learned that lack of running water

wasn't the end of the world, not having cell phones wasn't as tragic as they had imagined...and in the middle of the highlands of Guatemala, we learned how to see people who were different, but not so different after all. We could play with the kids, shoot hoops with the older ones, and see the pain in the elders' eyes. Our eyes were a little more opened.

His name was Amos. The prophets of old were in the business of opening people's eyes, shining light on the injustices around – not simply for the sake of seeing how many injustices could be named, but rather to see the people. The men and women, old and young, who were suffering because of the shared sins of the community. The prophet Amos wrote during a time of relative peace in the Holy Land, but the laws of Yahweh were being disregarded, as greed seemed to divide the people of God, with the wealthy becoming wealthier and the poor poorer. Amos preached about justice rolling down like mighty waters, and oh to those who were yearning for a drink, those words must have been like a healing balm. To those who owned the water supply, they were threatening. But, being faithful meant more than showing up to worship, praying prayers, and going home happy because you'd done your part. The prophets were always doing that – pointing out what was missing, trying to help people open their eyes...not to hurt them, but rather to help them find abundance and wholeness in a way they had been missing.

His name was Jesus. He went to his home synagogue in Nazareth, the place where he had grown up and learned to read the scrolls. They had been talking as church folks tend to do, sharing his successful teaching and leading around the region of Capernaum. They knew he had even healed some folks, and maybe he wasn't aware, but there were some members of the synagogue who could use a healing touch. So, they had pretty high expectations when he was scheduled to be liturgist. He stood up and was handed the lesson for the day, taken from the eye-opening prophet Isaiah. And he read the words printed. Words that spoke of liberation. Words that would have been good news to those who felt like outcasts and outsiders. Words of long awaited hope to those who were poor, blind, and oppressed. But many of those who had come to hear what young Jesus had to say were not in those categories, and they resisted seeing their neighbors who were. They didn't come to hear this. They came for their own wholeness. And when Jesus simply sat down as if saying this scripture is fulfilled today was good news for THEM? That was the last straw and they tried to kill

him. Some of them didn't stop after that particular failed attempt to run him off the cliff. Some of them were in the crowds years later yelling "Crucify!"

My eyes have been opened in different ways through different people I've encountered throughout my life. The process of opening our eyes is unique for each of us. For me, it was a gradual understanding that the ways I was raised, the things I had, many things I took for granted were not the same for everyone. I was taught that the police were our friends and could be trusted. I went to school and had parents who read to me and scolded me when my homework wasn't completed. I was encouraged to become anything I wanted to be. I know to not go certain places at night, to carry my keys in my hand, to look at dark corners just in case. My eyes are opening.

When we strive to be faithful... coming to worship, singing familiar hymns, joining our voices in praying Jesus' prayer, we long for connection to God, and Jesus taught that as we connect to God, we must also connect to our neighbors. We must open our eyes. We must see the woman caught in adultery as no different than you or I. We must see the man plagued with demons and illness as no less worthy of kindness and compassion. We must SEE the children who were often not even counted and understand that God's care isn't contingent on our lifetime achievement. Whatever you've done to the least of these, you've done unto Jesus. When you throw a banquet, invite the masses. Even those Samaritans, even the women, even those who you'd like to hold a grudge against because you've decided you know better than God, are beloved children of God. Just open your eyes. John Wesley taught his followers who were seeking revival and a revitalized faith that "there is no holiness apart from social holiness." They had to care about the plight of the coal miners. They had to listen to the voices of the homeless and the hungry and decide that even if they can't feed them all, at least they can feed some. As the family of God, we are all connected...all are our sisters and brothers, siblings and children.

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend, we gather to worship our God, and are reminded that the evils of racism are still present. Our eyes are opening. The lives of black and brown bodies are systematically devalued. Getting an indictment and conviction for the murder of an African American man when there's video evidence that it's taken place is progress. When the sentence is far less than many black and brown persons have gotten

for much less significant offenses, we know there's still work to be done. Our eyes are opening. When women and men are marching around the country standing up for equal rights – we know this isn't just an issue of a couple people being discriminated against because of their gender. It's about making sure that our daughters have the opportunities to not just be treated with respect, but reach their dreams without being harassed or assaulted and having to just deal with it in order to get promoted. Our eyes are opening. Being a person of faith, means engaging with our society, allowing our heart strings to catch stories of people – like Martin Luther King, Moses and James, Adrian and Lupe – and so many others who, through their humanity, help us live into ours. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Last night our youth had a lock-in, and one of the games that we DIDN'T get to play was one where everyone is tied together, and you have to work together to cross the finish line. If one or two people don't participate or go in the wrong direction, you can't win. This is a good exercise for our youth, but also for us as we remember how we are all in this together. I hope and pray that today might be a day when our blinders fall to the ground and our eyes become open, May our loins become bolstered to do something to make the world a better place – one story, one life at a time. God is at work, and nothing is impossible. God is doing big things in our midst – in us, through us, and around us. And we are invited to take part that the world might be transformed. May it be so. Amen.