

WHEN BELIEVING ISN'T SEEING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Rev. Mindy Douglas, the pastor of the Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, has been a friend of mine for many years, since we were colleagues in New Hope Presbytery. She is now a FaceBook friend. About ten days ago, Mindy posted a most moving and thought-provoking video which begins with this quote from Henry David Thoreau: "Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?"

The four-minute video contains scenes from a large health-care facility, perhaps a hospital. As you, the viewer, walk through the hospital, you pass many different people. Captions appear onscreen for each person.

* A worried looking man is pushed in a wheelchair through the front entrance: "Has been dreading this appointment. Fears he waited too long."

* A man heads out of the front entrance: "Wife's surgery went well. Going home to rest."

* A very gaunt woman in a hospital gown sits next to an IV pole: "Day 29. Waiting for a new heart."

* A man in the cafeteria offers a cup of coffee to his wife, who has her head in her hands: "19 year old son on life support."

* A couple sits in an exam room with the doctor. She looks confused: "Doesn't completely understand."

* In the next room, a doctor shows the patient the problem with her throat: "Too shocked to comprehend treatment options."

* A man slumps in a chair and checks his watch: "Waiting three hours."

* A woman and her daughter meet a volunteer in the hallway. The girl pets the therapy dog: "Husband terminally ill. Visiting dad for the last time."

* The volunteer: "Celebrating 25th anniversary."

* In an elevator:

* A downcast man: "Wife had stroke. Worried how he will take care of her."

* A hospital staff member: "Recently divorced."

* A young doctor: "Just found out he's going to be a dad."

* A man sitting on the edge of his bed, dressed in a hospital gown: "Daughter is getting married on Saturday. Determined to be there."

* In the hallway, a young man is being helped on a walker: "Worried about how he will pay for this."

* A maintenance man pushes a cart: "Tomorrow, first vacation in years."

- * An unconscious man with an oxygen mask lies in bed: “7000 miles from home.”
- * A nurse tends to a patient in the next bed: “Nearing the end of a 12 hour shift.”
- * One doctor greeting another doctor in the hallway: “7 years cancer free.”
- * A mom in the NICU, reaching through the opening in the incubator and letting her daughter’s tiny hand grasp her finger: “Hoping to hold her today.”
- * A woman in a gown sits in a waiting area: “They saw ‘something’ on her mammogram.”
- * Two women leave a patient’s room, one puts her head on the other woman’s shoulder: “Just signed DNR.”
- * A woman volunteer smiles, waves, and puts a sticker on a little girl in a wheelchair: “Always wanted a child of her own.”
- * A little boy skips down the hall in front of his father: “Ears all better! Finally!”
- * A young man in a neck brace walks slowly on crutches: “Car accident 6 months ago. Pain won’t go away.”
- * On the up escalator:
 - * First man: “Tumor was benign.”
 - * Second man (nervously tapping the rail): “Tumor was malignant.”

These words appear at the end of the video: “If you could stand in someone else’s shoes. Hear what they hear. See what they see. Feel what they feel. Would you treat them differently?”

Mindy’s comment on her FaceBook timeline: “This is very similar to what I experience every Sunday as I look out at the congregation.”

I have the same experience every Sunday as Mindy. When I come into the sanctuary and look out at you, I think about all we’ve been through together. I think about the tears — tears of joy at a wedding or baptism; tears of sorrow at the graveside or in the hospital; tears of regret in a private visit at home or in my study. I think about the laughter and celebrations — laughter around the tables at a covered dish luncheon or at handbell practice; celebrating our young people’s accomplishments or sharing the joy of good news from the doctor. I think about challenges we have faced together in our individual lives and in our life together as a community of faith. Week in and week out, that’s the context for my worship of God here in this sanctuary. We worship God together, in the midst of all of life’s ups and downs, joys and sorrows, celebrations and regrets.

Here we are again this morning, gathered and called to worship the God of life and resurrection, the God of abundance and generosity, the God of grace and mercy, the God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Zach led us in our Opening Sentences, which ended with these words, “Trusting in your goodness and love, we face the future. We walk by faith, not by sight.” How did you hear those words? How did you **say** those words? Were they a strong affirmation of faith for you? Did they express a deep longing in your life? Did they sound like a pipe dream? In light of what might be going on in your life today, were you even able to say to God, “We walk by faith, not by sight”?

The apostle Paul, who wrote the words we heard from 2 Corinthians today, was no stranger to the challenges and sufferings of this life. Just a few chapters later in the same letter, Paul tells us he received 39 lashes five different times. He was beaten with rods three times. Once he received a stoning. Three times he was shipwrecked, adrift at sea for a day and a night. He was in danger from rivers, from bandits, from his own people, from the Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, at sea. He suffered through toil and hardship, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst. He often went without food. He was cold and naked. (2 Corinthians 11:24-27)

And yet, Paul writes, “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day . . . because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen . . . for we walk by faith, not by sight . . . He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.” (2 Corinthians 4:16, 18, 5:7, 5)

Our Christian hope is not just for the future, as wonderful as that future is guaranteed to be. As Paul writes, “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.” (2 Corinthians 4:17) No, our Christian hope is also for the present, as difficult as life can be at times. Paul is no simple optimist who either ignores or downplays the realities of this life, in which our “earthly tents” waste away and are destroyed. Paul doesn’t preach, “Just believe in Jesus Christ and all of your troubles will disappear!” Paul doesn’t ask us to believe that if we simply have enough faith in God through Jesus Christ, we will somehow be exempt from the trials and tribulations and challenges of the human condition.

Then again, Paul is no simple pessimist. Paul doesn’t preach, “Muddle through this life as best you can and hope that things will be better some day.” He doesn’t advocate throwing in the towel in this life, nor does he wish us “Good luck!” to face life on our own.

Instead, just a few verses earlier, Paul shares with us the reason he can say (v. 16), “So we do not lose heart.” Paul says, “We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord,” and he talks about the glory of God shining in our hearts. It is this treasure, Paul says, that we carry around in our lives, these “earthen jars,” which we all know too well are susceptible to being “struck down” like a tent in a storm. But listen to what Paul says, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-10)

Paul is right there with us when life seems as if it’s going to overwhelm us. He talks about how we “groan” and long to be with the Lord. He holds out the hope that, indeed, we **will** be with the Lord some day. For now, God calls us to live by faith, to trust him in and for all of life. Paul reminds us, “we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. . . for we walk by faith, not by sight.” You may have heard it put this way:

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

My faith in a great God who has redeemed us in Jesus Christ and given us his pledge through his Holy Spirit of what is to come doesn't make my tears with and for you, my heartache and sorrows shared with you any less real or important. My faith in a great God assures me that God is with you and me, even and especially in those times in the hospital waiting room or exam room or on the escalator or in the privacy of your home or in my study — even at the graveside of your beloved family member and my friend.

It's said that “Seeing is believing.” But Paul reminds us that life is what happens “when believing isn't seeing.” Our believing — our trusting — doesn't happen in a vacuum. Just as God told Abram, “Trust me as you step out in faith and go somewhere you've never been before,” God calls us to trust him — in both the good times and the bad, in our celebrations and in our sorrows, when we shed tears of joy and tears of regret and grief.

The Alternative Sunday School Class is reading N.T. Wright's book, *small faith, GREAT GOD*. Today's lesson happened to be called “Not By Sight.” I wanted to show a YouTube video of a choir singing our second hymn, “We Walk By Faith and Not By Sight.” What I found, instead, was the Oakwood University Choir from Huntsville, Alabama singing a song by the same name, with the same message, but with somewhat different words.

*We walk by faith and not by sight.
We trust in God and not in might.
For in our darkness He is light.
We walk by faith and not by sight.*

*Sometimes trials come our way.
We don't know what to do or say.
But we know God will make a way
If we will trust, trust and obey.*

*We trust in God and in His Son.
What God has promised will be done.
And as each journey is begun,
His Holy Spirit makes us one.*

*We may not fully understand,
But we are guided by His hand.
And as we follow faith's command,
God leads us to the promised land.*

Let us pray: O Lord, help us to walk by faith, which is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. Amen.