

“Seeing a World Strewn With Pennies”

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Job 42:1-6, 10-17, A selection from Annie Dillard’s “Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,” Mark 10:46-52

When I graduated from seminary in 1985, AIDS was just starting to hit its stride, as it were. We were no longer calling it G.R.I.D. (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency), the bath houses in San Francisco had been shut down, and there was starting to be an awareness of the importance of safe sex.

When I moved here from the Bay Area to take my first job in a church, it was not long after the partner of one of my seminary classmates had been diagnosed with AIDS, and, as was so often the case in those days, he was dead within a matter of weeks.

Fortunately my job as an Associate Rector meant that I could spend time developing outreach ministries for the congregation, so among other things that I did, I helped found the NJ Interfaith AIDS Coalition, the Oasis (the diocesan ministry with the LGBT community) and the St Barnabas AIDS Resource Center (the latter of which I think may continue in some form or another to this day).

It was a busy time. Those of you who were here when the Eric Johnson House was founded know what I mean. There was a life-and-death urgency about what we were doing. It was all-consuming. There were meetings every day, it seemed. We were battling discrimination on multiple fronts, lobbying in Trenton, working with lawyers to get the legal infrastructure for these various organizations set up, and, amazingly, doing it all without email!

Throughout this time I was the chair of the NJ Interfaith AIDS Coalition. There were 3,000 people in Essex County alone living with HIV and AIDS and we were trying to provide spiritual resources for the whole state—identifying clergy who were willing to help with education, awareness, and pastoral care—and clergy who were willing to do funerals—a lot of them. It was exhausting work.

The reason I tell you this story is because of how completely consumed by all of this I had become. I will never forget the day my time as the chair of the NJIAC ended. It was about this time of year, and I was driving home from Newark on 280. There’s a place, I’m not sure exactly where—maybe just before or after West Orange, where you come up to the top of a ridge and look out over a bit of a dip before the next ridge—maybe by Eagle Rock Reservation.

I was driving home from a meeting, exhausted, and relieved, because now it wasn’t all on my shoulders in quite the same way, when I came up to the top of the ridge and saw the most amazing sight. There, before me, in a way that I had been completely unable to see for the weeks before, was the most amazing tableau of fall color. It was as if God had taken all of the crayons from my childhood crayon box that had names I couldn’t pronounce or didn’t understand, and colored the hillside in the most blazingly spectacular way—burnt sienna, raw umber and red indian crayons had been melted and poured over that hill (you’ll be glad to know “red indian” is now called “chestnut”), and even in the mist of that rainy day, they were jumping out at me and saying—“look, this is what you’ve been missing!” I was so consumed by all that I had been doing, that up until that moment, I would have told you that hillside was a hundred shades of grey—I had become unable to see color.

Did you love our contemporary reading today by Annie Dillard? Let me tell you a little bit about why I loved it, and what I think it has to do with living our lives as followers of Jesus.

Maybe it’s because we have had such a spectacular fall, with incredible colors, but I couldn’t help but think about them when I read the words, “The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand.” Do we need any more evidence of the existence of God than the glorious landscape that we have had front-row seats to see change over the last few weeks?

“But,” Dillard says, “and this is the point—who gets excited by a mere penny?” I had become so focused in those days on what I was doing—albeit important work—that I was no longer excited by the simple turn of the season from summer to fall. I was so focused on what I was doing, that I was blind to what was going on around me.

At the beginning of the story, Dillard tells of drawing a line with chalk, pointing to the penny that she has hidden, and later, of writing the words, “Surprise ahead” alongside it. Isn’t this what God wants for us? To show us something wonderful? To help us see things that we might not otherwise be able to see? In some way, I imagine that Jesus was the arrow that God drew, pointing to a vision of how the world could be—how we could live

in harmony. And I imagine God's delight, like Annie Dillard's, at the prospect of someone finding this free gift from the universe.

Dillard concludes this passage by saying that if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then you have with that poverty gotten something quite valuable. I think the healthy poverty and simplicity is about being able to see things we might otherwise miss because we are moving too fast or we are too distracted or we have too much to do or we think we are supposed to be doing something else. I think it's about finding the balance and wholeness that God longs for us and the world to have.

Today we hear the story of blind Bartimaeus. He sits by the side of the road, begging. But as I read the story, I wonder if we are the ones who can't see.

Is it possible that Bartimaeus is one of God's chalk arrows on the sidewalk, pointing us to something *we're* supposed to see? Is it possible that this story about Bartimaeus isn't so much a story about healing as it is about calling? Before his eyes are opened, the story says that he began to shout and to say, "Jesus, have pity on me!" A lot of people scolded him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the louder, "Have pity on me!" So Jesus stopped and said, "Call him here." They called him—"Don't be afraid," they said. "Get up; Jesus is calling you."

What follows is a rather strange question from Jesus—"What do you want me to do for you?" We think, as did those who probably surrounded Bartimaeus, "Duh. Heal his blindness." And this is what Bartimaeus asks for. As a result of the healing, Bartimaeus follows him "on the way." Did Bartimaeus miss the crowd saying, "He is calling you," or did he simply think that it meant, as do we, that he was being invited into Jesus presence?

The Good News of this gospel for some of us might be the physical healing. But it might also be the calling—the calling of each of us, healed or unhealed, broken or whole, sighted or unsighted, visible disability or invisible disability, the calling of each of us to follow the chalked arrow on the sidewalk to a wonderful gift that awaits.

I occasionally use a blessing that includes the line "... Let us be released from those things that bind us, or those ways by which we bind ourselves..." Most of us are not physically blind, and even if we were, that wouldn't necessarily be what needed healing. Instead, most of us are bound by things no one else sees, things that keep us from following the arrows on the sidewalk.

My prayer for us this week is that we cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make our day, since the world is in fact planted in pennies.