

Trees Walking

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 9, 2022 – Sunday Morning Worship

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' WEEKEND

Text: Mark 8:22-26

Trees walking. That was how Jesus' patient responded to his question, "Can you see anything?" This is one of the only times Jesus, acting in this story as a sort of ancient ophthalmologist, interacted with someone about how they were feeling as he attempted a healing. It's really quite extraordinary. It gives this particular healing story an air of authenticity as Jesus attempts to heal a man's blindness. How many of us during a visit to the eye doctor, have responded to a similar question? "Which is better – this one or this one?" as our vision acuity is tested. This is also noteworthy because it shows a time when Jesus did not get the healing perfect the first time he tried. "Can you see anything?" sort of implies Jesus had a sense the healing was not quite right, that more intervention would be needed for this blind man's healing to be complete. So, he made some sort of psychic adjustment – the text says Jesus "laid his hands on his eyes again and looked intently" – and the man's blindness was completely cured. Two tries. It took Jesus two tries to heal this blind man. Imagine that.

As we ponder this intriguing story together this morning, I am curious about the ways in which this story is about more than physical healing. It reveals both a vulnerability of Jesus – he didn't get the healing right the first time – and a sensitivity of Jesus to the person in front of him he was attempting to help – he knew the healing was incomplete after the first attempt. To me, these two facts are even more extraordinary than the healing

itself. Think about it. Jesus was already widely known as an extraordinary teacher and healer which is why the blind man's friends brought him to Jesus in the first place. Jesus had real authority and, based on previous healings and miracles the people knew he had performed, Jesus also had real power. This was a man to be respected and revered. This was a man with a well-deserved reputation for being miraculous and wise and having a special and unique connection to God. And yet, with all of this weighty reputation on his shoulders, Jesus didn't hesitate to acknowledge that something did not go quite right with the first healing attempt.

Imagine that scene for a minute. The man's friends who had brought him to Jesus were standing around, watching. The disciples too were right there, anticipating another swift and miraculous cure. But, wait a minute, something was wrong. Jesus had laid hands on the man, gently rubbing a mud mixture he had made from his own saliva and the dirt under their feet, but there had been no exclamation of joy from the man as the healing happened. And Jesus was still crouching down, looking concerned. What was going on here? Is Jesus asking the man if he could see anything? He'd never had to do that before! And what had the man responded? They strained to hear but couldn't. Then they watched, incredulously, as Jesus laid hands on the man a second time, staring intently into his eyes. This time, tears came to the man as he realized he could see again! Jesus smiled as the man rejoices with his friends, tears of joy running down his face. Two tries to get the man to where he could see more than just "trees walking."

Of course, none of us would go to a faith healer if something was wrong with our vision. We'd ask for prayers as we went to our own doctor, perhaps more than one, depending on the problem being experienced. The thought of remedying our own vision issues with a mud paste with the doctor's saliva as the base is nothing short of horrifying to our 21st century sensibilities. This leaves us to ask, what does this story about the healing of this blind man by Jesus – however many tries it took – say to us? Do we only read this story as another simple healing story, just one more building block of evidence that Jesus was the miracle-making Son of God? Or is it possible there is much more going on in this story than a simple act of helping a blind man to see?

As we ponder this question, I would urge us to consider that there is more than one type of seeing, more than one type of vision. The obvious way of seeing is what we're doing right now – using the amazing organs we call eyes which, by some process we really don't understand, take in information from the world right in front of us which our brain then transforms into the ability to see and observe the world around us in every waking moment. Some of us need assistance in the form of glasses or contact lenses to see detail, but basically the gift of sight is one we take for granted most of the time. This is the blindness Jesus is healing most obviously in today's story.

But what of the other type of blindness? What of the type of blindness that prevents us from seeing, from taking in and working to understand, new information? That is just as real and just as problematic as we have learned all too well in these past two Covid years. We witnessed with our own eyes and ears as some people absolutely refused to believe that Covid was anything more

than a really bad cold. They refused to believe it was dangerous, life-threatening. They refused to believe that a piece of cloth over their faces could slow down the spread of the infection of the disease they didn't think was real to begin with. They refused to believe that a vaccine could save their lives, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Covid is not the only example of what I think of as willful blindness, the determined disregard of factual information. Some people, for example, are determined to believe that people of color, immigrants, members of the LGBTQ community are somehow less than they themselves. They literally "see" skin color or gender identity as somehow disqualifying in ways they can't really define yet are still very real, to them. They "see" immigrants as bad people because all of them must have done something illegal to get here in the first place. They "see" illegal immigrants in the faces of people born here. Indeed, too many people literally see what they want to see, and little else.

One of the examples of this sort of tunnel vision is upon us this weekend. It is the changing notion of how some people see this holiday weekend. As recently as last year it was called Columbus Day and when I first came here, Columbus Day Weekend was a big one in Westerly. It was the unofficial end to the outer limits of the tourist season for one, and that's probably still true. There was a big parade that even churches participated in. It was fun, marching through the streets celebrating the cool October weather with deep blue skies and the incredible colors of fall. Many here in Westerly also saw it as a time to celebrate the Italian heritage of so many in the community, due to Columbus' own Italian origin. Westerly even has a statue to old Chris in

Wilcox Park, a statue which has become a barometer of how the way we “see” Christopher Columbus is changing, right in front of our eyes.

When I got here, the statue of Christopher Columbus in Wilcox Park was just there. It was nice enough as statues go, but nothing special. I do remember thinking it odd that there was a statue to him here, of all places, but nothing that out of the ordinary. I was no fan of his for reasons soon to be revealed, but if others were in the community, I could live with it. I didn't think he deserved a parade and I wasn't comfortable with the church supporting the parade in any way, and, truthfully, no one really seemed to object to that. So, life in Westerly just hummed along for all us, the seasons marking the only changes for Chris in the park. And then George Floyd happened. Things started to change. Statues of Civil War Confederate generals came down in city after city as they had now come to be seen as emblems of white supremacy. As that statue removal fever gained momentum around the country, local folks were suddenly seeing the Columbus statue in Wilcox Park in a whole new way. Christopher Columbus was no longer seen as a hero, but as the one who initiated the brutal destruction of the native peoples in the lands he claimed for the Spanish crown. The statue was actually defaced at one point, red paint dumped all over it, symbolizing the blood of all the indigenous people murdered as Columbus' primary legacy. But, many local folks did not agree, instead seeing that statue as honoring his Italian heritage and his spirit of discovery and the courage it took to travel to the New World. These folks saw, and some still do, all that the United States has become since 1492 as a valuable legacy Columbus put into motion. However, to

protect it from negative sentiments now running high, the statue was blocked off with a temporary fence, now permanent, leaving his legacy intact here at least for the time being.

But, dear ones, this question of celebrating Christopher Columbus is not over. Truthfully, it was never that big of a holiday, despite attempts to make it one. I don't know about you but I never thought much about Columbus growing up other than what we were taught in school. You know ... "In 1400 and 92 Columbus sailed the ocean blue..." Unfortunately, most of what we were taught about Columbus wasn't true. ¹ He wasn't a brave explorer; he was a fortune hunter who convinced the King and Queen of Spain to finance his search for a shorter route to the lucrative trading centers of Asia. He remained convinced to the end of his life that the lands he discovered and eventually conquered on behalf of Spain were not entirely new continents but instead a different access point to the Far East. He was a brutal man who took full advantage of the Doctrine of Discovery promulgated by the Pope in the mid 1400's to brutally subjugate the indigenous peoples of North and South America. ² So, it is no surprise that Christopher Columbus was no hero to the Native Peoples he encountered during his four voyages to what was then known as the New World.

Most of us who are white have had no occasion to think about Christopher Columbus much one way or the other. He was just "some guy" who "discovered" America. Except he didn't discover anything. He visited someplace no European had visited

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Columbus

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_doctrine

for hundreds of years (can't forget the Norse who colonized Greenland) and other Europeans followed him, eventually moving here and bringing an uncivilized, unpopulated land mass into the modern world. At least, that's what we've been taught to see in this version of history. The problem is, dear ones, that this is entirely wrong. Columbus did not discover anything. When he arrived, a sophisticated and essentially gentle people were already here and had been for millennia. They had governmental organizations we called tribes. They had a religion which guided their every waking moment. They were consummate hunters and farmers, saving the very colonists who would eventually enslave and murder them during their first difficult years in this strange new world. The real truth about Christopher Columbus, dear ones, is that his voyages inaugurated a bloody battle fought to enable the richest Europeans to spread their greed far beyond the boundaries of the geography they knew. Native populations were soon wiped out, or almost so. Most of those remaining were enslaved. As the centuries passed, this pattern of brutal conquering by whites of land they saw as empty continued until native peoples around the world were also almost eradicated. Remember this did not just happen here. It happened in Africa, Australia, New Zealand and parts of southeast Asia too. Columbus and those who came after him literally believed, and were reinforced in that belief, that only white Catholic men were legitimate owners of land and wealth, that only their way of life was valid, and that God was always and everywhere on their side. Now, at least, we are seeing this history, our history, with new eyes. We are daring to ask ourselves if what we have been told to see is the truth.

To be sure, our awareness of all this is only just coming to the surface as we dare to reconsider the history we have all been taught. There is a long way to go before this new vision of history reforms our way of thinking and interacting with people different from ourselves. But I take much encouragement from the fact that, on most calendars I have seen this year, this second Monday in October is now called Indigenous Peoples Day. In our own church, today's worship service and this sermon is our first foray into this new vision for the holiday. Truly, we have been like the blind man Jesus was trying to heal. For too long, if we saw the plight of Native Americans or Indigenous Peoples we didn't really process what we were seeing and hearing. They were like "trees walking" to us because we had no clue as to what had happened to them, or why, or how their misery was mired in the actions of some we had called heroes. No longer. Like the blind man after Jesus' second attempt at healing, we can now see clearly what we had not seen for so long.

Dear ones, this Indigenous Peoples Weekend, formerly known as Columbus Day, let us take to heart Jesus' question, "Can you see anything?" Let us strive to see what we have at times worked hard not to see – the injustices to so many who are our neighbors and equally beloved of God. May God continue to heal us so that we can not only see that which we have refused to see, but also accept God's guidance and assistance to make the changes this new vision requires of us. May Jesus continue to remove the blindness from our eyes to reveal all the amazing possibilities before us when we see each person as beloved of God and each day as an opportunity to work toward making God's vision of *Shalom* for all more visible, more real. May we reclaim

God's vision for the world in which we live so that our answer to Jesus' question, "can you see anything?" becomes "we see everything! Help us to know what to do." Amen.