

# “The Forest & the Trees”

Psalm 103:1-5; Mark 7:31-37, 8:22-26 <sup>1</sup>

The Biltmore Forest School, the first school of forestry in the United States, was established in 1898 by George Vanderbilt near his estate in Asheville, North Carolina.<sup>2</sup> Now known as “The Cradle of Forestry,” Jill and I have visited the area many times across the years.

Learning how to care for an entire forest is a crucial skill for the well-being of the planet, and learning how to care for individual plants and trees is a related but somewhat different skill that is probably just as important. I suggest to you that the ministry of Deacons in our congregation bears similarity to both of these ideas.

Our Deacons are charged with overseeing the spiritual health of the entire congregation, which is somewhat like giving care to the entire “forest.” And our Deacons are also charged with the spiritual care of individuals and families through our Deacon Family Ministry Program. Deacon Family Ministry is similar to the care of individual plants and smaller, defined areas of the “forest.” Deacons are called out to be “spiritual foresters and horticulturalists” among us.

Jesus said that He intends for all persons to experience spiritually “abundant” life, and we spent a lot of time thinking about “abundant life” on our recent retreat (John 10:10). The nine character qualities of “the Fruit of the Spirit” are one way to talk about “abundant life,”<sup>3</sup> and a similar list occurs in the Older Testament in Psalm 103:3-5, where God’s benefits in our lives are described this way:

*He forgives all your iniquity; he heals all your diseases. He redeems your life from the Pit; he crowns you with faithful love and compassion. He satisfies you with good things; your youth is renewed like the eagle.*

The verbs in these verses are alive with excitement: *forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies, renews*. These are moving, joyful, powerful words. And yet days don’t always feel like that, do they?

Some wit has observed that “the trouble with life is that it is so daily!” On some days, rather than feeling joyful, we feel that it’s almost more than we can accomplish to simply go through the motions to get through the day. On those days the future seems dark and hopeless. The psalmist knew about those days as well, because Psalm 103 goes on to talk about the way God has compassion on us in our troubles.

Growing up and growing older moves us through fairly predictable life stages, punctuated by the unpredictable crises of illness, accidents, bereavement, and by the inevitable consequences of our own poor choices. These crises require us to reorganize our personal identity and our family relationships, but they also bring the possibility of new encounters with God.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on October 22, 2017.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biltmore\\_Forest\\_School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biltmore_Forest_School)

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 5:22-23.

While crises can bring about significant growth and maturity, crises can also bring disorganization rather than reorganization, and regression rather than growth. Many of us know more than we want to know about the ways in which the crises of life can result in brokenness and bitterness rather than in healing and Hope.

But whether we like it or not, the fact is that brokenness is just as much a part of the human condition as is joy; and the healing of sickness and other forms of human brokenness is a central theme in the New Testament. Nearly one-fifth of the Gospels is given to telling the stories of Jesus' healings, and His parable of the shepherd who left the ninety-nine sheep in the fold to find the one sheep that was lost shows His deep concern for the individual in need (Matthew 18:12-14).

Experiencing personal problems doesn't necessarily mean that a person is not a Christian, or that she or he doesn't have "enough faith." But problems in living do mean that our learned ways of coping with life are no longer working. And it may be that they never did.<sup>4</sup>

This morning we gather to ordain one of our number and to commission ten others to serve as ministers of spiritual forestry and horticulture among us. As we prepare for this hugely important task, let's look again at our text in Mark 8 to see how Jesus serves as a model for those who offer ministry in His Name . . . .

*When they arrived at Bethsaida, some people brought a blind man to Jesus, and they begged him to touch and heal the man. Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. Then, spitting on the man's eyes, he laid his hands on him and asked, "Can you see anything now?"*

*The man looked around. "Yes," he said, "I see people, but I can't see them very clearly. They look like trees walking around."*

*Then Jesus placed his hands over the man's eyes again. As the man stared intently, his sight was completely restored, and he could see everything clearly" (vv. 22-26).*

It seems to me that this encounter has five parts, each with its own lesson for us.

First, **friends brought the man to Jesus**. Apparently, the blind man's friends brought him to Jesus and begged Jesus to heal him. Maybe the man didn't know about Jesus. Maybe he was afraid. Perhaps he was ashamed. At any rate, he was blind, and he couldn't find Jesus unless someone helped him.

In a similar way, sometimes you and I, too, are so blinded in our pursuit of paths that take us away from Jesus that we need courageous and honest friends who will do what it takes to turn us back to Him. Whatever the situation, real friends are persons who do for each other what needs to be done—like a family does.

The Bible says that it is possible to have friends who are closer than our own brothers and sisters (Proverbs 18:21), and the Church is just such a family. The Church is actually a family of families, and when any one of us is hurting, the whole body suffers (1Corinthians 12.12 ff.). Paul challenged us to carry one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), and to comfort each other "*with the comfort we ourselves have received from God*" (2 Corinthians 1:4).

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<sup>4</sup> I'm convinced that most persons, most of the time, are doing the best they can to meet their needs as they understand them. Our troubles come when we misunderstand and misidentify our needs (such as thinking that accomplishments and possessions will make us happy), or when the methods we've learned for meeting our needs are ineffective or damaging (such as when we think that using chemicals of one sort or another, or using power and control in relationships, will help us get what we want and need).

Deacon Family Ministry is one of the ways in which we carry out this mutual responsibility. Deacons offer ministry on behalf of the whole congregation, helping persons and families to move beyond their challenges toward spiritual health and strength. Deacon ministry is one way that we continue the work of Jesus. This ministry is conducted in confidentiality, but not in isolation. Deacon ministry is a ministry of the church.

Deacon Family Ministry proclaims the Good News that God brings wholeness to our brokenness, light into our darkness, Hope in place of our hopelessness. The goal of Deacon ministry is to help persons discover their God-given potential and to live more fully under the grace of God. As individuals and families move toward greater emotional and spiritual well-being, God's Kingdom advances, and the world is changed in small but meaningful ways.

The first thing that happened, then, was that friends brought this man to Jesus. The second thing that happened was that ***Jesus took the man outside the village.***

This was unusual behavior for Jesus. Maybe this was a way for Him to connect with this man and to meet his particular needs, needs that are not apparent to us. In any event, when Jesus took the blind man's hand and led him outside the village, Jesus established a personal relationship with him that was an important element in the man's confidence that Jesus could help him.

Deacon ministry sometimes involves a coming apart from the group in ways very much like Jesus' taking the blind man outside the village. The work of the Deacon is much like the work of a gardener. By careful listening and by gentle probing into the soil of the spirit, Christian caregivers discover spiritual seeds that are germinating, that need watering, or that have died.

The Deacon, with the help of the person desiring wholeness, may *sow* a little, *water* a little, *cultivate* a little, and *prune* a little, so that God may have greater freedom to cause the fruit of the Spirit to ripen and to bear more fruit. While they walk with us in our darkness, Deacons gently turn us toward the Light.

Wayne Oates has pointed out that such spiritual conversation is not dialogue so much as it is trialogue.<sup>5</sup> God's Spirit is present and active in these conversations. While God seldom removes all of our pain (pain is, after all, a huge motivator toward growth), God does draw us out of preoccupation with the past, orient us toward the future, and give us Hope.

The third thing we see in this story is that ***Jesus spit on the man's eyes and asked whether the treatment had been effective.*** I don't know about you, but this part of the story has always seemed both strange and unpleasant to me. It helps to know that the ancient world had a curious belief in the healing power of spittle, so Jesus used a method of healing that the man could understand.<sup>6</sup>

More is going on here than the spittle, though. This is Jesus' only recorded miracle that was not instantaneous, and it was recorded only by Mark—the earliest Gospel writer. Later writers may have been embarrassed by the story, as though it revealed some inadequacy in Jesus. I'm glad that Mark recorded this event, though, because without this story, you and I might have a much harder time understanding how God usually works in our own lives.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne E. Oates, *Pastoral Counseling* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Jesus is recorded to have used spittle three times: Mark 7:33-34, 8:23-25, and John 9:6-7. Jesus' actions differ slightly in each instance. Two occasions had to do with healing blindness; one with muteness.

After He spit on the man's eyes, Jesus asked him, "Do you see anything?" The man responded that he saw people who looked like "trees walking around." As he answered Jesus' question, the man participated in his own healing by responding to Jesus out of his own inner experience—as is true in contemporary soul-healing as well. If you and I are to find healing, there is some work that only we can do.

Fourth, after the man's response, **Jesus touched his eyes again**, and this "*second touch*" brought full healing and restoration. This second touch reminds us that spiritual healing is usually not so much instantaneous as it is a process. You and I don't generally become wounded and broken in a single moment, and we are not usually healed in a single moment, either. The process of soul healing, like the process of physical healing, usually requires time, as we discard old patterns of behavior and learn new ways of being in the world.<sup>7</sup>

It may have been that the process of the "second touch" was for the man's own benefit. Perhaps to have seen everything at once would have been too overwhelming. I wonder whether the man's recognition of people and his knowing that they were not trees means that he hadn't always been blind. I hope it means that, because that would closely fit our own experience. You and I aren't spiritually "blind" from birth, either, though we all become blind along the way, and we desperately need to regain our sight.

And, as you may have guessed, the power that brings about this healing is Love. God is its Source, and Jesus is its Model. The Good News of the Gospel is that there is no sin, no loneliness, no rejection, and no hurt that God has not already borne for us in the Cross of Jesus. God did this for us because God loves us! **Being loved is our natural condition.** *Being loved is your natural condition!* Isolation, confusion, loneliness, and brokenness are qualities of our fallen state, not our redeemed condition.

Both then and now, Jesus meets us where we are, mired in the muck of our own attempts at living, and makes it possible for us to begin again. With Jesus, Deacons, too, are *midwives of eternity*, seeing in us more than we are able to see in ourselves, as He did.

By God's Spirit, Deacons try to discover the point or the points at which the Gospel fits our brokenness, and begin to make that Good News understandable through personal relationship. **It is relationship that heals, because it is relationship that's broken.** When this healing begins, our lives begin to reveal the extraordinary possibilities God has promised.

Fifth, and finally, **the man saw everything clearly . . . and his life was changed.** Deacon Family Ministry is one of the ways in which you and I encourage one another to experience the miracle of God's inbreaking Kingdom. Working together, we bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom for captives, comfort those who mourn, release the oppressed, and bring sight to those who are blind (Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:18). Deacon ministry is one way in which we strengthen the Body of Christ and experience the powerful, healing Presence of Jesus. By this ministry, and by many other pathways, we gently nudge each other a little farther into the Kingdom of God.

As my friend Mark Jensen put it, Deacon ministry is "an ever-growing vision of the Kingdom, a melody that bids us come and sing. Images of destiny, of long-forgotten harmony, that lie beneath the words within us all."

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<sup>7</sup> None of us sees all of God's truth at once. This miracle is not simply the healing of one man. It is also a parable of what Jesus was doing with the disciples. In Mark 8:18, Jesus spoke of the blindness and deafness of the Twelve. In 8:25, He healed this man's vision. In 8:29, Peter's vision was enhanced to recognize who Jesus is, but he still did not see that it was necessary for Messiah to suffer.

