

## "Eyes of Faith: Peripheral Vision"

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### SCRIPTURE -

**Isaiah 43: 18-21** – The Lord says, "Do not cling to events of the past or dwell on what happened long ago. Watch for the new thing I am going to do. It is happening already – you can see it now! I will make a road through the wilderness and give you streams of water there ..... rivers that flow in the desert to give water to my people."

**Luke 8:40** - Now when Jesus returned from crossing the Sea of Galilee, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. Just then came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He begged Jesus to come to his house where his only daughter, 12 years old was dying. So Jesus turned from the crowd to follow Jairus, and as he went, the crowds pressed in on Jesus.

There was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had spent all that she had on physicians, but no one could cure her. This woman came up behind Jesus and touched the fringe of his clothes and immediately her hemorrhage stopped.

Jesus abruptly stopped as well and asked, "Who touched me?" Everyone denied it and Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you." But Jesus said, "Someone touched me, for I noticed the power had gone out from me."

When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling and falling down before Jesus, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him and how she had been immediately healed.

And Jesus said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

**SERMON** - We've heard three excellent sermons during this worship theme on "Weaving the Web." We've heard from Larry about the web from the viewpoints of the spider and of the lady who ran into the spider's web – and the crumbling web that is our health care system in this country. We've heard from Vince about the strings attached to webs that can get us stuck in the messy and rewarding webs of connections and commitment. We've heard from Andy about the web of faith that changes as God continues to speak to us and the web of community that supports us when we go through difficult times.

This morning I want to expand our thoughts about our webs yet again, and I've called in my favorite techno guru(s) to help me out. Let's start with the most immediate web we belong to. You are looking at a Google Earth overview of my house, and I ask you to see it as a symbol of your home as well. It's the place where the web of our family connections is spun. One of the best metaphors of the family system that I ever heard came from a Chaplain at Jacksonville University. Our son Chris was attending the incoming freshmen orientation, and Larry and I were at a meeting for the parents of those freshmen. The Chaplain held up a mobile and said, "*This is your family: here's the parent or parents, here is the child or children, here are the pets.*" Notice that the mobile is balanced. Notice what happens when I tug on or remove one part of the mobile. The entire mobile shifts. It's just like that with our families; remove or shift any one part and the whole system is affected, is thrown at least temporarily off

*balance, including the dog or cat."* That chaplain was right. Families are like mobiles; families are like webs: whatever touches one part of the system touches all.

Let's move our viewing frame a step out and look at another web we are part of: you are looking at a Google Earth overview of this church. The same principle holds true: whatever happens in one part of the system of this church ripples out to touch us all in some way. At the most basic level, think what happens if our child care aides don't show up or if there is no coffee on Sunday morning. At a deeper level, we are an incredibly healthy, loving, sane, and grounded congregation, and when we handle challenges well, like the impact of the economy on our budget, and when we handle transitions well, like the welcoming and integration of new ministers, we add strength and resilience to our web. Yet we all know of congregations that have been torn apart by disturbances in the web of communication and trust, and so we also know that we cannot take UCG's web for granted, that we each and all must be involved in keeping our connections strong and healthy.

One of the strengths of this church is that we frame our organizational structure and decision-making not as an top-down pyramid, but as concentric circles. In the center of the circle is Church Council including the ministers and church officers. The next circle contains all our board and committees, linked to Council by their representative, none more important or powerful than any of the others. The outer circle is the congregation surrounding and accessible to all the other circles. If I diagrammed the interactions among all the parts of these three circles, I would have a beautiful web on which we are all linked.

Moving on out with Google Earth, we are part of another web – the community of Gainesville. And what affects one part of our community ultimately vibrates out to affect us all: such as those who are homeless, the students, our police and firefighters, our health care industry, and our schools.

Next, we are part of Florida web – what affects the state in terms of decreasing population and tourism, a hurricane hitting Daytona Beach or off-shore drilling in the Gulf, directly affects every one of us and every web of our lives.

We are connected to the web of this country – and here we see the Google Earth view of the United States. The issue of affordable accessible health care for everyone brings out every character, institution and complication that is stuck (apparently with some rigidity) on that web: doctors, patients, young, old, insurance companies, health care professionals, lawyers and politicians.

And of course we are intricately connected to the web that is our planet earth. Most of you have heard of the "butterfly effect" which research meteorologist Edward Lorenz brought into public reference, when he was using numerical computer models to run and rerun weather predications. One day, as a shortcut on a number in the sequence, he entered the decimal .506 instead of entering the full .506127. That .000127 difference created a completely different weather scenario, giving rise to the idea that a butterfly flapping its wings in Hong Kong could impact the weather in New York. The truth that Lorenz's study revealed is that we belong to a web of creation in which nothing, absolutely nothing, is inconsequential. We are that connected to one another, to the Earth, to the web of life. Think of the reverberations of global warming.

Think as well of the environmental examples of ways we have been able to clean up our air and our water when all parts of the system worked together on the problem.

In the prophet Isaiah's words, The Lord says, *"Do not cling to events of the past or dwell on what happened long ago. Watch for the new thing I am going to do. It is happening already – you can see it now!"*

Look at the Earth, our home, as we see it there on the screen. And think of this view of the Earth, this understanding of our web of connections, as the new thing that God is doing in our lives and in our world right now: showing us every day in every way possible that we are part of all of the webs of creation and relationship. God is still speaking, calling us to look at the world and our place in it with fresh eyes, calling us to see that there is no such thing as an individual able to operate solely alone with no impact on the webs of life which he or she brushes every day.

I chuckle as I remember Ralph Waldo Emerson, the 19<sup>th</sup> century transcendentalist, who loved to expound on the virtues of his own "self-reliance" as an enlightened soul who needed only God, not other people. Meanwhile, Emerson forgot to mention that he depended daily upon his wife, his mother, three servants and a gardener to survive.

Every interaction – between people and people – between people and things – between things and things – changes the history of those people and those things. So how do we learn to see all these webs of connection that we are part of? I think peripheral vision is a helpful image. Peripheral vision is that part of your sight that occurs outside the center of your gaze. Look straight ahead of you for a moment, not at me. Can you see a color on either side of you without turning your head or moving your eyes. That's your peripheral vision.

I believe that to be part of a web of relationship, linked to all the other parts of the web, I have to be able to see not just what is ahead of me, but what is all around me and beside me. Peripheral vision allows us to see 180 degrees around us, vision that we clearly need if we're going to attend to the webs of our relationships, our community, and our planet.

Let me take you back for a moment to this story of Jesus and the woman who touches his garment. Here's Jesus, getting out of the boat from a long trip, hurrying to the village to talk with the people and he's interrupted by the Moderator of the local synagogue whose daughter is desperately ill. Jesus hears this father's pain, abruptly changes his own plans and heads off behind this man Jairus, hurrying I'm sure, feeling a little off-balance by this shift in what he is doing, focusing his thoughts and prayers on the healing and care he needs to bring to this young girl. Suddenly in the midst of all that rush and the crush of the crowd and the urgency of his mission, Jesus senses that someone has touched – not his hand, not his foot, but the fringe of his clothes. And he comes to a dead halt. If I were choreographing this scripture passage as a skit, I'd have the disciples, who are scurrying along behind Jesus, bump right into him and fall all over each other. As they all stop, Jesus asks, "Who touched me?"

Now imagine the horror this woman feels. Her sustained bleeding has made her an outcast; she's not supposed to be mingling with the crowd. She's obviously tiptoeing, creeping over, trying to touch this Holy man without drawing any attention to herself, and suddenly she's thrust into the limelight. When she sees that she cannot

stay hidden, she falls on her knees and tells everyone that she has been healed. And Jesus says to her, "Daughter, it is your faith that has made you well; go in peace."

I suggest to you that Jesus' amazing awareness of her touch, his sensitivity to her presence, is a form of spiritual peripheral vision, the ability to tune into what is and who is, around us, just out of our sight, yet part of our web. It is the same sensitivity that allows us to understand that the plastic bags we use become the floating trash islands the size of Texas that drift in the Pacific Ocean, that the weapons we manufacture find their way to conflicts far around the globe, that the rising waters in the Pacific coral atolls south of the Equator are the precursors of the shrinking of our Florida Keys. It is our own spiritual peripheral vision that notices the visitor standing alone during our fellowship time or sitting alone as we enter the seminar room. It is our spiritual peripheral vision that sees the person a few seats down our row who is wiping away tears after the prayers.

Jesus is the master web builder, the consummate mentor of reaching out to those on the sidelines of everyone else's vision, bringing all manner of people into healing and transformation, not by power, not by manipulation, but by his ability to see around the edges, to pick up on the smallest and sometimes most hidden vibrations on the web of life.

Peripheral vision, in this sense, is a spiritual practice and the good news is that it can be practiced. Strengthening your physical peripheral vision allows you to be more aware of your surroundings and that leads us to the spiritual peripheral vision of our heart and soul. So here are two things to practice this week.

If you are able, please stand up for a moment. Let your hands hang down in front of you, palms facing inward, one hand on top of the other. Raise your hands directly in front of you so that you are pointing at the sky and your hands are at the top of your field of vision. Don't move your eyes or your head. While looking forward, move your hands apart and then bring them slowly down just by or behind your ears. Keep looking straight ahead and at the same time see your hands until they reach the starting position but with your palms facing up.

Let's do it again – and this time silently say a breath prayer as you do it: **"Open my eyes, O God, to all that is around me, even that which may be just beyond my sight."** You can sit down.

Practice this once a day this week. And then, notice each day what you see on either side of your path – who is over there in the corner? What is happening on the other side of Gainesville? On the far side of the earth? Allow your awareness to expand to the whole circle around you, to the web in which you live and move, to which you are in varying degrees stuck or unstuck, and to which there is no end.

Most of us come to this church, I believe, seeking wholeness in our lives and in our faith. J. Phillip Newell reminds us that wholeness does not come in isolation; it comes in relationship to the whole web. In his words, "we are being invited to seek a new salvation that will come through and with one another, not in separation from one another." Wholeness comes in relationship, not in fragmentation.

Communion is the sacred ritual of the church that celebrates this wholeness, this connection with God and with our sisters and brothers in this church and around the

world. This bread is the gathering together of many grains into one loaf, just as we as scattered individuals are gathered together in this meal.

Sitting with his friends around a table long ago, on a night filled with celebration and with sorrow, Jesus blessed the bread, broke it, and shared it with his friends, saying "When you eat this bread, do it to re-member me." Eat this bread to re-member, to put back together the broken pieces of your life, to repair and restore the broken strands on webs of life.

The cup is the symbol of oneness with God and with one another. It is the cup of blessing that Jesus poured out and passed hand to hand to his friends, saying "This cup is poured out for you as God's covenant of new life renewal and transformation."

This Communion is open to all. Please take a piece of the bread and pass the basket to your neighbor saying "Peace be with you." Then hold your piece of bread and dip it into the goblet of wine or into the clear glass of grape juice. We are suspending the option of drinking from the goblets and cups during this fall flu season. We will sing the Communion song together as the bread and the wine are served. After the song is ended, just sit in quiet prayer or meditation in the silence.

**PRAYER** - *The Lord says "Do not cling to events of the past or dwell on what happened long ago. Watch for the new thing I am going to do. It is happening already – you can see it now! I will make a road through the wilderness and give you streams of water there ..... rivers that flow in the desert to give water to my people."*

Grant us, Creator of all, eyes to see the webs of which we are a part and the faithfulness to attend to our webs of connection, of concern, of support.

Strengthen our spiritual vision that we may also see beyond ourselves to those sisters and brothers, to those places in our community and world, in need of kindness and care.

We pray that what we do and what you weave, O God, out of all our strands, will create patterns of mercy, of renewal, and of truth.

May I, may we, know the light of your grace, within us and around us, weaving weaving, weaving the circles of unity and love. Amen.

**BENEDICTION** - I see grace happening vividly in and among us, the people who are part of this spiritual community. There is always someone who quietly and prayerfully supports others. There is always someone to lighten things up when we become too serious, and someone who calls us back when we have flown too far afield. At any given time, someone is concerned with getting the job done and someone else is saying that it is loving God which is important. There is always someone in a prophetic role, reminding us to see beyond ourselves to our brothers and sisters throughout the world.

The gift – and we are all aware of its being a gift – is that somehow the grace of God has stayed with us in our joys and in our struggles as a community, to be lovingly present and lovingly connected to one another. May that grace surround us as a church and as part of the web through which we are connected to all human beings, to all creatures, to this planet itself. ~ *adapted from Gerald May in The Awakened Heart*