

Sunday January 12, 2025

First Lesson: Mark 8:22–26

Gospel Lesson: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Sermon Series: Revitalize: Humility

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- We are continuing our sermon series, *Revitalize*, and today we are focusing on how revitalizing humility can transform us—both as individuals and as a Church family. Our guiding lesson is found in Mark 8:22-26, a passage we will continue to reflect on as a model for our aspirations. This story reveals an extraordinary example of humility, embodied by the blind man and the role humility played in his encounter with Jesus.
- Take a moment to consider how difficult it might have been for the blind man to admit, after being touched by Jesus, that the healing didn't work the first time.
- **Imagine the courage and vulnerability** it took for him to say, “I see people, but they look like trees walking around.” This story stands out as the only instance in the Gospels where Jesus healed someone in two stages. It's

a unique and profound moment that challenges our understanding of humility.

- Now, let's place ourselves in the blind man's shoes.
- In our culture, admitting that we "only see trees"—that we don't have it all together, that things aren't perfect—can feel like failure. Our society often values quick fixes and polished results, making it hard to confess when something isn't right. Yet this man's humility and willingness to admit that he needed more was the gateway to his complete healing.
- As I reflected on this story, I couldn't help but think of a recent experience helping to lead Cindy Newsham's funeral.
- Cindy's family had specific requests—they preferred the service to be held downstairs, not in Black Fellowship Hall.
- At first, I thought I understood what Compassionate Ministry (comprised of UWF) looked like in this situation.

- However, as the day unfolded, I realized how easy it can be to get bogged down by the logistics and moving parts of a funeral. I was so focused on what needed to happen that I metaphorically “saw trees” when it came to understanding the deeper intentionality of compassionate ministry.
- It became clear to me after the service, when I was exhausted and preparing to clean up, that I hadn’t fully grasped the beauty of what the Compassionate Ministry team does for the church.
- I assumed I had to take on the burden myself, but Sheryl Pont and her team had already arranged for people to come in and handle the cleanup, relieving that load. It was a humbling moment—a reminder of the intentional love and care that goes into each detail of ministry and how often I fail to see it clearly at first.
- This awakening leads me to ask the question of all of us;
How often do we only see trees?

- For me, this question invites us to pause and reflect, not just on our personal lives but on our shared work as a church community.
- What does it mean to approach our roles with the humility to admit when we don't have it all figured out? What does it look like to confess that we need more clarity, more grace, more of God's touch to see things as they truly are?
- As we explore these questions, let's allow the blind man's humility to inspire us. Let his example show us the path to deeper healing and transformation—not just for ourselves but for our church as a whole. **How often do we only see trees?** Let this question guide our hearts as we move through this sermon and beyond.
- **As we continue to reflect on the theme of humility and the concept of "only seeing trees," let's turn our attention to Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.**
- This passage captures a pivotal moment in the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus.

- It's a rich narrative that not only reveals the identity of Christ but also invites us to consider the ways we perceive—and sometimes misperceive—God's work in our lives.
- **Looking into the Biblical and Historical Context;**
- In Luke 3:15, we find the people in a state of expectation, eagerly wondering if John might be the Messiah.
- This reflects a broader historical moment. At the time, first-century Palestine was under Roman occupation, and the Jewish people longed for a deliverer—a Messiah who would free them from oppression.
- Many expected a political or military leader, someone who would overthrow Rome and restore Israel's sovereignty.
- Their understanding of the Messiah was often tied to power, triumph, and immediate action.

- John’s response to their speculation reveals his profound humility and clarity of purpose.
- He declares, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).
- John points away from himself and toward Jesus, emphasizing the transformative nature of the Messiah’s work.
- Yet even with John’s clear testimony, many in the crowd likely struggled to grasp what this meant. **They were “seeing trees”**—holding onto incomplete or distorted views of who the Messiah would be.
- The narrative then shifts to the baptism of Jesus. Here, we witness a profound moment of revelation.
- As Jesus is baptized, the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends in bodily form like a dove, and a voice from heaven declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22).

- This Trinitarian moment affirms Jesus' identity as the Son of God and inaugurates his public ministry.
- However, even with this divine confirmation, many people—including those closest to Jesus—would continue to misunderstand his mission. They expected a conquering king, but Jesus came as a suffering servant.
- Again, we see how easy it is to “only see trees” when God's ways do not align with our expectations.
- **Expanding the Concept of “Only Seeing Trees”; let's delve deeper into this idea of “only seeing trees” in the context of Luke's Gospel.**
- When the people asked if John was the Messiah, they were looking for a solution to their immediate problems—freedom from Roman rule, restoration of national pride, and tangible signs of deliverance.
- They couldn't yet see the larger picture of God's redemptive plan. Their vision was blurred by cultural expectations, political desires, and limited understanding.

- They were not ready to see the Messiah as the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world.
- Even in the moment of Jesus' baptism, when the voice from heaven clearly identifies him as God's Son, the full implications of this truth remained unclear to many.
- **How often do we find ourselves in the same position?** We experience glimpses of God's work in our lives—moments of clarity, moments of grace—but our vision is still incomplete. **We “see trees,”** perceiving only part of what God is doing, or interpreting it through the lens of our own assumptions and desires.
- **Applying this concept to Our Lives; Think about how this plays out in our own faith journeys.**
- How often do we, like the crowds in Luke 3, approach God with preconceived notions of how things should unfold?

- How often do we miss the deeper work God is doing because we're focused on immediate solutions or surface-level outcomes?
- **This is a long way of saying that admitting that we “only see trees” requires humility.**
- It means acknowledging that our understanding is limited and that we need God to touch us again, to clarify our vision, and to help us see the full picture.
- Expanding a little more on what I experienced during Cindy Newsham's funeral.
- Amid planning and coordinating of ministry in general, I became so focused on the logistics that I failed to fully see the beauty of the compassionate ministry around me.
- It wasn't until the end, when Sheryl Pont and her team stepped in to relieve the burden of cleanup, that I realized **how often I “see trees.”**

- The deeper reality of God’s work in that moment—the intentional care and love of a church community—was something I only began to see with greater clarity after the fact.
- Similarly, in Luke 3, the people had to move beyond their immediate expectations to grasp the deeper truth of who Jesus was and what he came to do.
- **This wasn’t an instant realization.**
- It was a process—just as it often is for us.
- How often do we need to humble ourselves and admit that we don’t yet see clearly?
- How often do we need God to touch us again, as Jesus touched the blind man in Mark 8, so that we can move from partial vision to full understanding?
- **And so let it be so that A Call to Humility and Openness is offered to all of us perhaps both individually and collectively in these stories today.**

- As we reflect on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22, let's ask ourselves: **Where are we still “only seeing trees”?**
Where are we clinging to incomplete visions of God's work in our lives or in the world around us?
This passage challenges us to adopt a posture of humility and openness, trusting that God is at work even when we don't fully understand.
- John the Baptist models this humility by pointing beyond himself to Jesus, acknowledging his own limitations and celebrating the greater work of the Messiah.
- Jesus' baptism reminds us that God's affirmation and presence are with us, even when our vision is incomplete.
- And the ongoing journey of faith invites us to keep seeking, keep asking, and keep trusting that God will clarify our vision in God's perfect time.
- So I ask again: **How often do we only see trees? Let this question guide us as we seek to deepen our faith, embrace humility, and open ourselves to the**

transformative work of God in our lives and in our church.

- There is an incredible opportunity before us as a church family—a chance to live into our mission of being community-centered, focused, and minded to share God’s love with everyone.
- Last Thursday, I had the privilege of meeting with some of our Church leadership Chairs and representatives from the Northeast Family Center.
- They are seeking a home to continue their daycare center and are deeply committed to remaining in Northeast Lincoln.
- This potential partnership has the power to revitalize not only our physical space but also our shared mission in profound ways.
- The Northeast Family Center has proposed a partnership that would involve substantial investment in which they are willing to pay into our church building, **that equates**

to nearly half a million dollars in much-needed renovations.

- They are also offering a significant rent component and a long-term commitment—not just to use our space but to truly partner with us in ways that align with our mission.
- Together, we could provide a home for their vital services while strengthening our identity as a hub for community care and transformation.
- To share a little bit about what the Northeast Family Center Does:
- The Northeast Family Center is a beacon of hope and service for families in our community.
- They provide high-quality daycare and early childhood education, giving children a strong foundation during their formative years.
- They also offer after-school programs, family support services, and resources for parents that foster stability and growth.

- By focusing on the holistic well-being of families, they address critical needs in our neighborhood. Their commitment to Northeast Lincoln aligns beautifully with our call to be a source of God's love and light.
- The statistics speak for themselves.

The Northeast Family Center (NFC) is a community-based nonprofit organization dedicated to serving youth and families in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Their mission is to educate children, engage families, and empower the Northeast Lincoln community.

[Northeast Family Center](#)

Programs and Services:

- **Early Learning Center:** NFC offers early childhood education for children aged 6 weeks to 12 years, providing a variety of learning activities to support development.

- **Preschool & Pre-K:** Full-day classes with developmentally appropriate activities designed to prepare children for kindergarten success.
- **Community Learning Centers:** Programs that offer additional educational support aligning with school learning objectives, helping students plan their futures and succeed academically.
- **Looking at the Community Impact:**
 - NFC serves over 600 individuals annually, focusing on building healthy families and neighborhoods through parenting services and child care programs.
 - Their Early Learning Center is licensed to accommodate up to 120 children, accepting ages from 6 weeks to 13

years, and participates in subsidized child care programs to support low-income families.

- Through partnerships with organizations such as Lincoln Littles, Lincoln Community Learning Centers, Nebraska Wesleyan University, Lincoln Public Schools, and the University of Nebraska, NFC works to meet the diverse needs of the community.
- By providing affordable early-childhood education, before and after-school programs, and family support through parenting education, NFC aims to help more children start kindergarten ready to succeed, enrich learning experiences, and empower parents in their parenting abilities.

So here is where the Vision of Seeing Beyond the Trees is really pertinent for our Church community;

- While the logistics and details of this partnership are important, the greater invitation is to look beyond the immediate needs and see the bigger picture.
- Like the blind man in Mark 8, we may find ourselves **initially seeing only trees—focused on the challenges, the unknowns, or the disruptions such a change might bring.**
- But as Jesus touched the man’s eyes a second time and gave him clarity, we too are called to seek God’s vision for what this partnership could mean for our church, our community, and the Kingdom of God.
- **The possibilities are extraordinary!**
- This collaboration could strengthen our existing partnerships, such as the one with the Malone Center,

and open new doors to connect with organizations like Nebraska Wesleyan University.

- **It could create a vibrant synergy between our church and Northeast Lincoln**, fostering deeper relationships and a stronger sense of shared purpose.
- **The forest of opportunities—spiritual, relational, and missional—is vast, but it requires us to be willing to see it.**
- As we stand on the threshold of this opportunity with the Northeast Family Center, we are reminded of the profound truth that God often invites us to see beyond the immediate—to move past “only seeing trees” and embrace the vastness of the forest of possibilities.
- **This is more than a logistical decision; it is a call to live into our mission as a church that is community-centered, focused, and minded to share God’s love with all.**

- Through this potential partnership, we are not just offering space—we are becoming co-creators in a vision that transforms lives.
- The Northeast Family Center’s work aligns beautifully with our commitment to justice, equity, and community empowerment.
- Together, we can make our church a beacon of hope and healing in Northeast Lincoln, a place where children are nurtured, families are strengthened, and God’s love is made tangible.
- The possibilities are limitless.
- **Imagine the children** who will learn and grow here, the families who will find stability, and the partnerships with organizations like Nebraska Wesleyan University that will flourish.
- **Picture a future** where our church is not just a building but a hub of vibrant ministry and collaboration, touching countless lives in ways we can only begin to imagine.

- But this vision requires faith.
- It requires us, like the blind man in Mark 8, **to humbly admit where our vision is limited and trust God to clarify it.**
- It requires us to move past the fear of change or the weight of uncertainty and lean into the promise of what God can do through us.
- This is a moment to embrace the forest, to trust in the Spirit's leading, and to boldly step into God's unfolding story for Lincoln First.
- As we move forward, let us commit to prayerful discernment, open hearts, and a willingness to follow wherever God leads.
- Together, we can embrace this opportunity to not only house the Northeast Family Center but to partner with them in building a community that reflects the fullness of God's love.

- This is our chance to live into our calling, to revitalize our space and our mission, and to share God's abundant grace with everyone who walks through our doors.
- Let us go forth with courage, humility, and faith, trusting that God is doing something new and inviting us to be a part of it.
- The forest is before us—let's step into it with hope, with love, and with the assurance that God's vision is far greater than anything we could imagine.
- Together, we can see beyond the trees and embrace the limitless possibilities of God's kingdom.
- Let the Church Say Amen!