

Jon Hauerwas – May 22, 2016 – “Tuscumbia, Alabama”
Psalm 119 (selected verses) and Matthew 5:14-16

In 1886, twenty-year-old Annie Sullivan had just completed six years of education at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts. There, she had graduated as the valedictorian of her class. Now, full of knowledge, energy, and enthusiasm, Annie traveled to Tuscumbia, Alabama to begin the formal education of a deaf blind girl named Helen Keller. Sullivan could not have known how challenging this undertaking would be.

As a small child, the life of Helen Keller was full of tantrums, kicking, and rages. She threw cutlery, pinched, grabbed food off of dinner plates, sent chairs tumbling, shrieked, and struggled. Having discovered the use of a key, Helen promptly locked her mother in a closet. She overturned her baby sister’s cradle. Her wants were physical, impatient, helpless and nearly always belligerent. In fact, it wasn’t long after meeting her new teacher that Helen struck her, knocking out one of Annie’s front teeth.¹

At first, Sullivan was understandably overwhelmed by Helen’s condition. She wrote a letter to an advisor from Perkins, describing herself as “feeling about in the

¹ Cynthia Ozick, “What Helen Keller Saw,” *The New Yorker*, June 16, 2003. Access date May 21, 2016.

dark” in this new role as teacher to a high needs student. Annie’s phrasing here – that she was “feeling about in the dark” seems an apt metaphor for a young woman who was far from home and embarking on a new career. It was also a powerful word play for one who had lived three fourths of her life with a visual impairment. “Feeling about in the dark” was an all too common reality for Annie.

And yet, where Sullivan lacked, Keller’s challenges were even greater. Annie retained partial vision while Helen had none at all. Additionally, Helen lacked the ability to hear and suffered from a speech impediment, which for many years left her unintelligible. Remarkably, Annie quickly broke through to her new student, ultimately freeing her from a “totality of exclusion.”²

After a month with Sullivan, Keller “had grown docile, affectionate, and tirelessly intent on learning from moment to moment.” Her progress was rapid and staggering. Just one year later, Helen’s journey was celebrated in newspapers all over America and Europe.

At Annie’s prompting, Helen began reading John Milton’s “Paradise Lost” at age twelve. In time, she entered college and even completed an autobiography before

² *ibid.*

her twenty-second birthday. Later, Keller became a world traveler, speaker, and advocate for the blind. And all along the way, Annie Sullivan was her constant companion.

For me, the story of Helen Keller's life is more personal than bookish. This is because I was born in Florence, Alabama, just five miles north Tusculumbia, not to the date, but exactly one hundred years after Helen's birth. My grandfather's closest, lifelong friend lived in Tusculumbia. And though my immediate family moved to South Carolina when I was four, we returned to Florence several times each year. We would visit my grandfather's friend, who loved to golf as much as I do. And, on several occasions, we attended a live production of "The Miracle Worker" at Keller's childhood home. The house and grounds now serve as a museum.

I vividly remember seeing the fountain where Annie poured water into Helen's hand, spelling W-A-T-E-R into her palm, over and over again until she finally understood that everything has a name. And I remember key scenes from the play featuring Helen's difficulties, her despairing parents, and Sullivan's attempts to intervene.

Helen's story is also personal because, as a Christian, I am drawn to these dual images of light and darkness. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed."

Helen's life had a spiritual element, as well. When she was first introduced to the life and teachings of Jesus, she responded by affirming that while she always knew that God was there, she did not know that God had a name. And later, Keller wrote her own spiritual autobiography.

For well over a century, the story of Helen Keller's life has captured our collective imagination as we can try only to understand the great difficulty of "feeling about in the dark," as Annie Sullivan once said. For years, Helen did so in a world without light, without sound, and all too often, without connection. Thus, Annie became for Helen the gateway to a lifetime of meaning and purpose. And she did so by opening a path to communication and a way to wonder.

By age nine, Helen Keller, who years earlier had been called a savage, wrote a letter to the author John Greenleaf Whittier, saying, "It is very pleasant to live here

in our beautiful world. I cannot see the lovely things with my eyes, but my mind can see them all, and so I am joyful all the day long. When I walk out in my garden I cannot see the beautiful flowers, but I know that they are all around me; for is not the air sweet with their fragrance? I know too that the tiny lily-bells are whispering pretty secrets to their companions else they would not look so happy. I love you very dearly, because you have taught me so many lovely things about flowers and birds, and people.”³

These words, mind you, were written by a nine-year-old girl who was both deaf and blind and had only learned to communicate three years earlier. Yes. Annie Sullivan, the miracle worker, had unlocked for young Helen a passion for imagination so essential for a lifetime of wonder. And I think again of her description. “When I walk in my garden I cannot see the beautiful flowers, but I know that they are all around me; for is not the air sweet with their fragrance?”

Christian friends, so it is in our relationship with God. Our senses and our imaginations are able to detect a thousand little signs of the presence of God. And though we may not come face to face with the Almighty in this lifetime, we know

³ *ibid.*

that God is here. No longer are we “feeling around in the dark.” But rather, we are constantly reminded of the One from whom all blessings flow.

So, too, have the power to unlock the imaginations of others. To help them see what they cannot see. To help them hear what they cannot hear. To remind them that life is full of blessings beyond measure. Today, as we celebrate our teachers in this place, we give thanks for every teachable moment. For every lesson learned. For every concept illumined. For every glimpse of wonder.

May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.