

## ***Living the Story of Seeing Yourself as God Sees You***

Based on Judges 6:1-24, Mark 2:13-17, & John 4:4-30 & 39-42

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on Feb 8, 2026

I want to ask you to close your eyes and travel back in your life to a time when maybe you didn't have a whole lot of confidence in yourself. Can you remember a time when somebody else actually believed in you more than you believed in yourself? Maybe it was a coach back who saw your potential long before you did. Perhaps it was a director in a play who cast you in role that was far bigger than you thought you were ready for. Did you have a teacher or a boss who spent extra time with you, believing that you really could do the difficult work.

I have a friend who was a strong and terrific athlete in high school. Her entire family competed, traveling all over the Midwest during the winter months. My friend was good, but nowhere near the best. She won some races and events but not nearly as many as she didn't. Even a couple of her own siblings had more first place finishes than she did. And then one day, one of her coaches said something to her that utterly shocked her. That coach said, "I think you should try out for the National Team." My friend's jaw dropped. It sounded utterly ridiculous to her. She hadn't even been dominating the local and regional weekend circuit. But this coach saw something in her that she didn't see in herself. So, after getting over the shock, she said she'd give it a try, committing to the coach's ambitious plan. A few years later, she was standing on a podium in Albertville, France receiving an Olympic Silver medal, the first ever won in that event by an American athlete.

Did you know that you have a coach like that in your life – even now...? His name is Jesus, and he doesn't see you like you see yourself. While you see your flaws and limitations, he sees your potential. While you see all your failures, regrets, shortcomings, and shames, Jesus sees you as his own precious child, his own amazing creation, made in his own image. Let me show you what I mean in our three scriptures for the morning.

We began with the story of Gideon in Judges chapter 6. In the chapters before Gideon comes into the picture, Israel had been abandoning the covenant agreement they had made with God. You'll remember, from the first of the ten

commandments, that Israel was to worship Yahweh and only Yahweh. They were to have no other gods in their lives. But as they moved throughout the territories on the Ancient Near East, they were exposed to the polytheistic practices of other nations and had begun to worship Ba'al and build altars to these other gods. Each time Israel did this, God gave those other nations power over the Israelites, and thus the Jews were constantly under attack and siege. By the time we get to Judges 6, we're introduced to Gideon. He is from one of the smallest and weakest clans in all of Israel. He is the youngest and smallest in his own family. He had never fought, and when this angel approaches him, Gideon is literally hiding out in a cave, sneaking outside only to tend his small garden, so he and his people wouldn't starve to death.

It was in this moment – a moment of fear, a moment of weakness and emasculation, a season of cowering and hiding - that an angel of the Lord appeared to young Gideon and said this, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior...” Can you imagine Gideon's reaction in this moment. I bet he looked behind him and all around to see if there was somebody else this angel could have been talking to. “Me...? A mighty warrior...I'm the runt of the litter. I'm hiding, running scared...doing a little gardening here. I think you came to the wrong cave...got the wrong guy...”

You see, when Gideon looked in the mirror, he saw a little, weak man, inexperienced in battle, terrified of the Midianites. But apparently God saw a mighty warrior, and just a couple of chapters later, Gideon was leading a small army of only 300 men, which took on and defeated the Midianites. Now, of course, they didn't achieve this victory alone; they had the presence of the Lord with them, guiding and directing them. And most of all, Gideon and his army had started to see themselves as God saw them – not as cowering cowards but as mighty warriors.

We see a very similar dynamic in our brief passage from Mark 2. This is very early in Jesus's ministry, where he is calling and gathering his first disciples. Mark tells us that Jesus goes, of all places, to a tax collector's booth, inviting Levi to follow him. I'm pretty sure Levi's internal reaction to this Rabbi's voice was eerily similar to Gideon's reaction to that angel's voice. I mean, think of how Levi saw

himself! He was a turncoat! He had said 'yes' to serving the Romans – the very occupying power that was oppressing Levi's own people. Levi was now collaborating with Rome in the most atrocious way – collecting taxes for them from his own struggling people. And here a Jewish rabbi was calling that same Levi to follow him as a disciple?

Jesus saw something in Levi...something Levi didn't see in himself. And later that night, when Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, Levi couldn't help but notice that it wasn't just in Levi that Jesus saw some potential, for that dinner party included other tax collectors and all kinds of notorious sinners. The Pharisees who passed by were appalled at the company Jesus kept. But, you see, Jesus saw something in Levi and all these folks that not only the Pharisees couldn't see, but that these unusual dinner guests could not see in themselves. Are you starting to see a pattern here...? Let's turn to the third passage.

In John 4, Jesus encounters a beleaguered, downtrodden Samaritan woman, who feels so horribly about herself, that she takes her daily trip to the town well at high noon – the time when no one else would ever carry their bucket, due to the intense heat and the high rate of evaporation that would make the trip home with a full bucket highly inefficient. But for this particular woman that was a small price to pay if she could avoid the judgmental stares and the verbal barbs she would receive for having had five failed marriages.

When this woman looked in the mirror, it's not hard to imagine what she saw – a succession of failures, the inability to get the most important human relationship in her life right. The lines on her face from all that grief, not to mention all those high-noon trips to the town well in the sweltering desert heat, must have made her wonder how she could have fallen so far.

But then along comes Jesus, an unorthodox rabbi with a knack for seeing potential in people that they could never see in themselves. He meets her at that isolated well, and while he makes it clear that he knows her heartbreaks and failures, he shocks the heck out of her by seeing Olympic caliber potential in her as an evangelist. Jesus blows away this sad, lonely, and broken woman by telling her something he had not told anybody previous to her. He reveals to her that he is the Messiah, and she runs to tell the entire town the amazing news. And it

seems, that despite her past, this woman was incredibly effective as an evangelist, for Mark tells us that “many of the Samaritans in that town believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony.” When Jesus looked at that Samaritan woman, he saw something very different than the woman saw in herself.

So that brings us to our sermon series topic once again – jumping into the story of Jesus and his love. Our three stories this morning offer us a two-pronged portal. On the one hand, we are invited into the story to explore what Jesus sees in us. This portal invites us to step away from the mirror we are so accustomed to looking at, the one that always leaves us frustrated and disappointed by what we see. We are invited into a place where Jesus smiles back at us and says, “I see Olympic potential in you. Let me tell you what I have in mind for you at this stage in your life.”

But there’s another dimension to today’s portal that is even more exciting. We are invited to jump into the story of Jesus where we can be that teacher, that coach, that advocate, that encourager who can believe in another person more than he/she believes in themselves. This may an especially appealing portal for those of us who can’t see our own potential anymore. Entering this particular doorway only requires that we turn our loving attention to a person we can believe in, that we can encourage, that we can treat like Jesus treated Gideon, Levi, and the woman at the well. If you want to make your retirement years more meaningful and fulfilling than you ever thought possible, enter this portal; jump into the story of encouraging another person by believing in their potential. This is what happens in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring relationships. This is what happens for those of us who mentor at the jail. This is what happens for those who are AA sponsors and volunteers at the schools. And who knows – it might be your own grandchild that you can believe in and invest in!

Lives are changed when we believe in a person more than they believe in themselves. Some of *our* lives have been changed because of that very truth. If there are two things I want for every one of us today, it is 1) that you would come to see yourself as God sees you, and 2) that you could help someone else see him/herself the way that God sees them. Jump into the story of Jesus and his love right here and right now. The world will be better for it. Amen.