

SERMON – “From Blindness to Sight” – MARCH 9, 2008

John 9: 1-41

Because I have been very nearsighted since early childhood, I have always been well aware of the value of sight. I can remember when I was resisted wearing my glasses how much I missed. There were the humorous times as a young teenager, when for the sake of vanity, and totally buying into the popular statement of the day: “Boys don’t make passes at girls who wear glasses” –I would go around half blind – in a fog, and not recognizing at a distance the very boys I wanted to impress!

Now I wear contacts but I’m not glasses free – now I juggle reading glasses, and sunglasses and sometimes distance glasses.

But being nearsighted and being blind are two very different things. The impact of this morning’s story is the transformation from no sight to having greater vision than anyone else in the story. The story of the man who was blind serves as a vehicle for the Gospel writer, John, to remind us that Christ is the Light of the World, and unless we too are en-light-ened, we are worse off than that man at the side of the road.

Because of the complexity of the story, I’m going to start this morning with a look at what the text is doing – a brief Bible Study – and then bring it back to suggest a direction where the story might take us today.

The narrative begins in a typical fashion. However, it wasn’t just an ordinary day. According to John, Jesus had just fled Jerusalem to escape being stoned. Now, Jesus and his disciples pass by a man who was born blind and a discussion begins about the cause of his blindness, reminding us that the ancient world mistakenly tied suffering and illness to sin and punishment. That is a dangerous attitude that surfaces again today: How often do we ask, “why has that happened to Jim, what did Mary do to deserve that? He is such a good person! We too, without thinking about it, seem to link illness or bad times to sin and punishment.

Jesus, however, is not concerned about this – he will not enter into a discussion of cause and effect. Jesus takes us where we are and leads us to healing. As one pastor phrased it: “Jesus mixes the grit of grace and the waters of Baptism together and puts mud in our eyes so that we can see the forgiveness, the hope, the healing, and the reconciliation that we have not

been able to see, blinded as we are by our arrogance, our fears, our worries, and our doubts.” (Thom Shuman) For Jesus, the important moment is not to look at the past, but instead draw everyone into the healing that is about to happen and for that to become the metaphor for teaching. In John’s scheme, every encounter with Jesus forces a decision. According to John’s sequence of events, Jesus has recently declared that he is “the light of the world” and this has set off a new controversy. The crowds are talking! The Pharisees are plotting. Jesus has even predicted his death once again. In this case, the focus of the story is on the degree of vision – not the physical ability to see near and far – rather, it is about insight and the broadness of vision.

John is a very sophisticated writer: the story is actually the most developed story in all the gospels. It actually involves seven scenes and six sets of characters: Jesus, the man born blind, the neighbors, the Pharisees, the parents, and the disciples. Pay attention to the drama of what happens: as the man born blind is coming into the light so that he can see, the others are moving into the darkness. As the scenes unfold and the story is told, the man born blind goes through a progressive widening of his vision. Initially, we are told that after the man washed in the pool of Siloam “ he came back seeing”. What does he see? He sees Jesus, the man. By verse 17, however, that vision has undergone a change. How he sees the man who cured him now is as “a prophet”. In verse 33, the vision widens further and he sees that this prophet must come from God because he couldn’t do what he did otherwise. Finally in verse 37, we are told that he confesses and believes that Jesus is “the son of man” or another title for the messiah.

While the blind man is undergoing this journey into the light, the Pharisees are going in the opposite direction. They are seeing less and less. They are entering blindness. Initially, in verse 15, they apparently accept the healing of the man born blind. At verse 17, they have subtly moved from acceptance and instead put it on the man born blind; you say that he opened your eyes, and by verse 24 they discredit the miracle and the miracle worker declaring that Jesus is a sinner. In verse 29 they completely deny his divinity saying, “We don’t know where he comes from”, and in verse 34, they reject the man born blind as well because he dares to proclaim Jesus as coming from God.

The major contrast of the story is that the man born blind makes statements or asks questions out of ignorance but ends up each time, making a confession of faith. The Pharisees, on the other hand, make confident statements of certainty that lead them into ignorance about who Jesus is.

Perhaps there's a hidden message of the value of doubt and the danger of certainty, but that is another sermon.

Given that background, what I want for us to explore this morning are the "eyes" of the story. There are really six set of eyes. Besides the Pharisees and the man born blind, we have the eyes of the disciples, the neighbors, the parents, and Jesus. Each group has an important part in the story. I would suggest that there is a part of each of us to be found among the characters. Take a look at these with me. To genuinely look into the eyes of another is so often the path to self-revelation.

First, there are the eyes of the disciples; they only see a problem. They don't see a person in need, but rather an abstraction. They have a theological problem to solve. The man born blind, who indeed is never named, becomes a case study. It's like the doctor who refers to "the appendectomy" in room 221 or the tendency on the politicians' tendency to reduce very human problems like the casualties of war or victims of famine to cold statistics or to use them as pawns in global power games. The disciples asked for a theory that will adjudicate responsibility and guilt. Jesus proposes a practice that will bring light. We see with these eyes of the disciples every time we lose sight of the valuable human being that is being affected by policies or news reports or racism and don't try to bring both relief and change. The story calls us to "watch out" for our view of people – keep it personal!

There are the eyes of the Pharisees. They look at the man born blind and see not a problem but an opportunity: they want to use the man born blind to get to Jesus. Their power has been threatened. They are willing to get rid of this man – they throw him out of the temple – in order to eradicate Jesus. These are the eyes that view themselves as the protectors of the world of the sacred. There is only one way to God and that's through their "learned" understanding – their predetermined approval. I identify these eyes in me as those eyes that have developed defense structures and habitual ways of looking at things – that have difficulty seeing different points of view. It is also those eyes within me that will dismiss what someone is saying or doing because I don't like the way that they look, or because of something that they have done in the past, or are associated with a group that I don't agree with.

Next we see the eyes of the neighbors - they don't all see the same thing. They see what they expect to see and don't quite believe anything that

challenges their vision. They are conditioned eyes. The skeptical eyes. Surprises are not welcome! They remain the disinterested eyes who are spectators of both miracles and injustices, but always from the sidelines, never entering in. Maybe they are those anxious eyes within us when the new and the unknown enters. I also identify those eyes as sometimes the eyes of the church –caught in the desire to preserve the familiar or stay safe and comfortable.

The eyes of the parents are the eyes that are caught between delight and fear. They are common eyes among parents as their children grown older and more independent. They are the eyes that struggle with misunderstanding. Eyes that are disappointed when original expectations are not met, and their children go another path. They are also the self-conscious eyes that are always worrying about what others think. They are the eyes that limit our actions – perhaps even paralyze us - because of fears of disapproval. They emerge whenever we aim to please even if it compromises what we believe is following the way of Jesus.

The eyes of the man born blind: These are the eyes of one who is in transition. These are the eyes of delight and wonder who have experienced a change in their life and are still trying to take it all in. These eyes have seen Jesus or felt the embracing presence of God. Wow! They are receptive to the mystery and see the world in a new light. I told you the story of John Newton this morning before we sang “Amazing Grace”. Those were radically changed eyes. The eyes within us perhaps see in new ways a little more subtly. These are the eyes that see something or hear someone in a new way that brings new understanding into our lives. We might read a phrase in a book that says, “Aha” – that’s how I’ve been feeling. We might be walking along the beach and feel washed over by a way of peace. These are the eyes that open wider and wider to the possibilities of love. These are the eyes, once opened, that are available to see the needs of others and to respond.

Finally, we see the eyes of Jesus. This sacred, holy one who sees the eyes of a person in need and pronounces him whole (or holy) and well. These are the eyes of acceptance who have transformed a scapegoat into a faith-filled witness. These are the eyes reveal the loving power of God. They see beyond the behavior to the heart. They act as mirrors helping us see ourselves. They might just turn our lives upside down in order to turn it right side up in a new way. These eyes are searching the landscape for one more set of eyes - our eyes.

Our eyes bring to the story our own life with all of its strengths and weakness, our visions and blind spots. How would it look if we allowed Jesus to heal our blindness? We might see leadership emerging in strange and unexpected places. We might hear God speaking through the voices of those who have been residing at the margins of our communities. We might find new ways of relating to God and each other – ways that we had not imagined before, and ways that might bring new life to our ministries, our communities, and to the people around us. We might discover a Spirit that we thought we had lost, a Spirit that might bring us to new ways of sharing our own encounters with Christ in such a way that someone else might also seek Him out. Jesus has declared, “I am the light of the world”. Paul reminded us this morning, “Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

Will you join me in calling on Jesus to:

Open my eyes that I might see
glimpses of truth that has for me. (Please turn to hymn no. 454 and sing the first verse prayerfully.

Place in my heart the wonderful key
that shall unclasp and set me free.

Silently now, I wait for thee.
Ready my God thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me.
Spirit Divine!

(Thanks to Diamuid McGann, “Journey within Transcendence – a Jungian approach to the Gospel of John” for the “six eyes” basis for this sermon.