

Who Sees? Who Doesn't?
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

This is the third sermon on John 9 which tells what happened when Jesus healed a man born blind. If you have been reading this chapter to prepare yourself for worship — and I hope you have for that is why we print in the bulletin and the newsletter the scriptures for upcoming sermons; preaching isn't just what the preacher does but what we all do together; the preacher prepares in advance and the congregation is blessed if you also prepare in advance — you know that as the story progresses, the blind man increasingly sees and others, particularly the religious leaders, become more and more blind. So today we are asking who sees and who doesn't?

Do you ever close your eyes and run your fingers across the Braille characters on cash machines or elevators or other places where such are found? It boggles my imagination to know that people can train themselves to “see” with their fingers and read those tiny bumps. Almost all of us take seeing for granted because we have eyes that function effectively. We may need glasses but we can see. How effective is our spiritual vision? That's the question for today and perhaps like those who learn Braille, we need to train ourselves to see better spiritually.

So let's turn to the final verses of this story of a blind man who increasingly sees and sees people around him who are increasingly blind.¹ Let's read it in John 9.

John 9.35-41 (NRSV)

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

How blind are we?

At first glance this story about the blind man appears to be about blindness. In fact it is about light. Back in verse five Jesus says that he is the light of the world. The question throughout the chapter is, how do people react to that light?

That Jesus is the light of the world is no surprise for readers of John's Gospel. When we read the gospel as a whole — something we should all do more often — we discover in verses four and five of chapter one that Jesus is the light of the world. We read it every Christmas: “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” This world is lit by the light that shines in Jesus Christ. Do we see that or are we blind? Who sees and who doesn't?

Of course, there are many kinds of blindness in this story. Physical blindness is easy enough to

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching, Year A* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 215-216.

understand. For one reason or another, a person's eyes don't work right.

But there are other kinds of blindness. At the beginning the disciples wanted to know whose sin had brought about the sad circumstances of a man born blind. They asked "why" questions for which there is seldom an answer. They wanted to know this because they shared the common belief that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people.

Let's not think this is just an outdated superstition. When suffering strikes us today we almost automatically ask two questions: "Why me?" and "What have I done to deserve this?" Sometimes today we don't even question whether we've done something wrong. We just blame God. Nowadays we tend to blame God, both for the cataclysmic (which insurance companies call "acts of God") and for the trivial. I don't remember all the details but I do remember at an Winter Olympics one time when a speed-skater scraped the ice and lost race. Apparently this had happened before and I remember his wife cried out instinctively, "Why, God, again? God can't be that cruel!"

Or a young woman once wrote a well know radio pastor this letter: "Four years ago, I was dating a man and became pregnant. I was devastated! I asked God, 'Why have You allowed this to happen to me?'"

Exactly what role does God play in an ice-skater losing control on a turn or a young couple losing control on a date?

Jesus cut through all that blaming blindness by saying that blindness, both the man's physical blindness and blindness as a metaphor for the human condition, are not the result of sin but an occasion where God's works can be seen.

Then there was the blindness of the blind man's parents. You would think they would be happy that their son could see now, that he would no longer be a burden on them, or a beggar in the streets. But they were more concerned about what the folks in their faith community would say. Maybe the parents' fears were justifiable if the faith community reacted as it appears they did.

And then there is the blindness of religious leaders. Throughout the story the Pharisees confidently claimed to know who the sinners are: Jesus for sure, and the blind man, maybe his parents too. But in the text that we read this morning, those who claim to see are in fact blind. They thought they could control how God acted. Healing is work and work cannot be done on the Sabbath. So, they insisted, the blind man's healing couldn't be from God.

But Jesus will not be controlled by us. The light of the world was outside of their control and is outside of our control. I can identify with those religious leaders for I am a religious leader. And the story makes me wonder how much I try to control the way God acts. Think about that. I plan worship. It's my job. And I wonder if I'm blind to how much I want to control your experience with God.

There is lots of blindness in this story in John 9. Of course, it's not just a story from long ago. It's written to make us think about our own blindness. Who sees? Who doesn't? How blind are we?

You know, we can beat ourselves up with questions like that. We can condemn ourselves. We can feel that what we've done is so bad that even God cannot or will not forgive us. We can condemn others because we are unsure about ourselves. Or ...

Or we can have faith. We can have faith that our blindness is also the occasion where the light of God can shine. The spiritual danger is not being blind. The spiritual danger is either thinking that we're not blind or that we are so blind that not even God can help. But notice what the blind man in the story did. (It always comes down to what we do.)

- He did what Jesus told him to do: go to the pool and wash the mud and spit out of your eyes (**obedience**).
- He told others what happened, simply and honestly, saying that a man named Jesus had changed his life. (**witnessing**).
- At first he didn't know where Jesus was but he came to believe that he was a prophet (**growth**).
- He was not swayed by all the people who reacted against him but eventually declared that Jesus was from God (**persistence**).
- He finally met Jesus again and said he believed (**faith**).
- Then, and this is the last thing the formerly blind man did, he worshiped (**worship**).²

Faith leads to worship. If it does not, we are still blind. That's why your worship is the most important time of your week. For in worship, you see the light of the world and then you can walk in the light.

Conclusion

Awhile ago I read about a woman who left a lucrative career to enter full-time service with troubled and abused young people. Her income was literally reduced by 75%. She was forced to sell a lovely home and move into a small, rented apartment. Her nine-to-five schedule increased by adding many "on-call" hours to her regular hours. Often she works weeks without a day off, carrying with her the pains and problems of disadvantaged kids, and working diligently for some sort of resolution. Her entire lifestyle has been turned upside down and when asked what prompted this, she replied, "Jesus Christ did. For the first time in my life, this past year I have begun to see myself as someone who is loved, unconditionally, no matter what. And it liberated me to be able to love others the same way. After forty years of stumbling around this world, at last I am able to see why I'm here."³

That woman was born blind, if you will. But Jesus Christ, the light of the world, opened her eyes just like he did for a blind beggar 2,000 years ago. That's what Jesus does.

Perhaps you're thinking, *but I'm not sure I believe all this; perhaps I'm still blind*. No. Remember that blindness is not doubt. Blindness is not wondering if you believe all this or thinking it doesn't all make sense yet. Blindness is not uncertainty about miracles really happening. Spiritual blindness is saying, "I am *sure* that this is NOT God." The religious leaders were sure ... and surely blind.

We are perhaps very much like the blind man's parents: at times uncertain and afraid. But that is the moment of faith for Jesus will find us and ask, "Do you believe?" Then we can say, "Yes, Lord, I believe." Then we offer the Lord our worship.

² Stephen Vincent DeLeers, "Preaching the Lesson," *Lectionary Homiletics* 10.4 (1999): 13. "It is not just for dramatic effect that John presents a growing vision on the part of the man born blind, and a growing blindness of the Pharisees. Little in our lives of faith happens in an instant, and little in our moral lives lived in response to that faith happens in an instant. Martin Luther famously proposed that a series of conversions marked our response to the gospel: the conversion of the mind, and then the heart, and then the purse. So too the gospel story depicts a process, a process in which we are all participating."

³ John K. Bergland, ed., *Abingdon Preacher's Annual 1993* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) 102.