

Seeing

John 9:1-41

First Presbyterian Church

February 28, 2021

Opening Words

Matthew Henry once said: “There are none so blind and those who cannot see.” There are none so blind and those who cannot see. This morning’s reading from the Gospel of John reveals that there are two kinds of blindness. One kind of blind is physical. The other kind of blind is moral and spiritual.¹ In chapter 1 of the Gospel of John we read these words about Jesus: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”² With this promise ringing in our ears, let us worship God.

John 9:1-41: Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind

Prayer of Illumination

God of light, You made the eyes of our heart to see you. Today we bring you these eyes, admitting we have underused them, misused them, even abused them. Sometimes we see wrongly... sometimes not at all. And we can’t seem to fix it on our own. Trusting that with you it is never too late, forgive us... heal us... enlighten us...so our eyes might see you at work in our lives. Amen.

Scene 1

¹As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. ⁴As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. ⁵While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. ⁷“Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means Sent). So, the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

Meditation

It begins in tragedy - a man who is born blind. He has never seen the sun rise or set... never once has he gazed into a flower or the face of a child... he has lived an entire lifetime without the gift of sight. And though we know persons with visual impairments often live very meaningful lives, however, you look at it, it is tragic. As is often the case, tragedy quickly turns into theology... and when Jesus’ disciples see this man along the road, they instinctively ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?”

¹ William Willimon in Pulpit Resource, 1999, p. 44

² John 1:9-12 (selected)

It's such a natural thing for us – something bad happens we ask “why?” Why him? Why her? Why me? And in Jesus’ day there was but one answer - Sin. Suffering was the result of sin. If this guy is suffering everybody agreed, somebody must have sinned and sinned big. Everybody agreed, except Jesus. No, Jesus saw this tragedy NOT as a chance to point fingers or assign blame or “theologize,” but as a time for God’s power to be released in his life... a time for a little heaven to come down to earth. So, taking some of that earth... and applying it with his heavenly touch, he heals the man born blind right on the spot! The bandage comes off... the man squints and blinks at the light... and he who once was blind now can see. And everybody screams, “Glory! Hallelujah! Come and see what God has done!” At least that’s what you’d think they’d say. But that only shows how little you know about human nature... and how little you know about religious folk!

Scene 2

⁸His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.” But he himself insisted, “I am the man.” ¹⁰“How then were your eyes opened?” they demanded. ¹¹He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So, I went and washed, and then I could see.” ¹²“Where is this man?” they asked him. “I don’t know,” he said.

Meditation

And so, it begins. Like a White House aide who’s just received a subpoena to appear before a Grand Jury, the man is besieged by questions from every side: How were your eyes opened? Where’s the man who did it? What did he do to you? Tell us again, just *how* did he open your eyes? Not one “Hallelujah!” or “Praise God!” No “How does it feel?” or “What’s it like to see for the very first time? Just “How?” and “Who?” and “Where?” and “What?”³

It’s hard to believe the unbelievable, isn’t it? Just ask the Roman Catholic housewife in Conyers, Ga. who was drying her hands at the kitchen sink when she looked out the window and saw the Virgin Mary in her backyard. Was it God, or not? Or the Lakota medicine man who performed a healing service for a seminary student with lymphoma and the cancer went away? Was it God, or not?⁴ Or the mainline Protestant pastor who awoke one January morning in a stupor... his head throbbing... his body unable to move. He saw a little girl, dressed in white, pointing toward the door – “You must get up and get out, or you will never get out.” And as he collapsed on the front steps, the emergency personnel rushed in – the house is full of carbon monoxide. A few minutes more and he would have been dead. The pastor believed the child was God’s angel sent to warn him.⁵ Was she? We all know there many astounding things that happen in this world that may have nothing to do with the power of God. They have to do with the power of the human imagination... the power of suggestion... or even the power of outright deception. So what if something is not God... and we believe it is?⁶ What if something is not God... and we believe it is?

³ Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon “A Tale of Two Heretics,” in “Home by Another Way,” p. 74.

⁴ BBT, *Willing to Believe*.

⁵ Willimon, William, in “All I Know Is...”, *Pulpit Resource*, March 6, 2005, p. 42-43.

⁶ BBT, *Willing to Believe*.

Scene 3

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. ¹⁴Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. ¹⁵Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So, they were divided. ¹⁷Finally they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet."

Meditation

Several years ago, a Presbyterian minister walked into his favorite optical store to get some stronger lenses for his glasses. As he approached the desk, he noticed a large sign sitting on the counter. In big, black, oversized letters it read, "PRESBYOPIA." "Goodness!" he thought to himself, "I know our denomination is having its problems, but I didn't realize we'd become a disease." Then he read the small print: Presbyopia – a condition common to middle age in which the declining flexibility of the lens makes it increasingly difficult to see what is right under your nose... increasingly difficult to see what is right under your nose. Presbyopia – no doubt a Presbyterian disease... but not limited to ONLY the descendants of Calvin. The disciples suffered with it. Upon seeing the man born blind, THEY were blinded by theological prejudice... which led them to immediately ask, "Who sinned? This man or his parents?" Clearly, some of the man's neighbors had caught it. "This can't be the same person. He looks kind of like him, but naaah, it can't be him. No one born blind ever sees again." And certainly, the Pharisees have this dreaded disease. Messiah is right under their noses, but they can't see him. "He heals on the Sabbath... he violates the laws of Moses... he is a sinner... he can't be the Messiah!" Presbyopia – the inability to see what is right under your nose. It can be a dangerous, debilitating, and sometimes deadly disease!⁷

Scene 4

¹⁸The Jews still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. ¹⁹"Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?" ²⁰"We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. ²¹But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. ²³That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

Meditation

For all the times I have read and preached this story, I never remember noticing just how ALONE this guy was. At the start, he was just a blind guy selling pencils in the subway corridor... when, all of a sudden, the "Light of the World" walks by and opens his eyes.⁸ And the next thing he knows his neighbors and friends don't recognize him... the Pharisees and synagogue leaders turn against him... his own mother and father all but throw him under the bus to save their own place in the community.

⁷ Ptomey, K.C. in "Seeing," preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tenn., March 17, 1996.

⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor in "Willing to Believe," *Christian Century*, March 6, 1996, p. 259.

And then, there's another little detail in the story that for some reason I had missed - even Jesus disappears. Because the Lord had sent him off still blind to wash the mud off his eyes, he had never laid eyes on his healer... wouldn't know him if he saw him... and now he's pretty much on his own to deal with the fallout. Well, what we now know is this was LIFE for the members of John's congregation... for the very people John was writing his gospel. They were ostracized by their families, kicked out of the synagogue, denied jobs and housing. And they were having to struggle with all this without Jesus... without the One who had first opened their eyes. Somehow this man born blind has to make his own way... he has to make sense out of what has happened to him... he has to decide what, if anything, he'll say about it... and perhaps most difficult, he has to do it alone.

Scene 5

²⁴A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man is a sinner." ²⁵He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" ²⁶Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" ²⁸Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! ²⁹We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from." ³⁰The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. ³²Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

Meditation

Now, if there were auditions for parts in this story, I suspect most of us would try out for the blind man. It's a hard part, but a really great one, with such great potential to showcase our significant talent! Yet, the truth is... however much we might want (and should get) the role of the blind man, we are not naturals for the part. Admit it... we're not outcasts! We've never been set outside the community for our sins. Instead, we are Presbyterians... the consummate "insiders" –

fully-vested, law-abiding, pledge-paying, creed-saying members of the faithful congregation.⁹ Or more to the point, we are the Pharisees who are simply trying to fit God into our intellectual and spiritual boxes. Now, I'm not saying we Pharisees do is not important - it is! When presented with a mighty act such as this one, it's important to form a committee and launch an investigation and ask whether or not it is God's act... whether or not this is really God. After all, we don't want to believe the wrong thing... the Bible warns us about believing the wrong thing – and if something is *not* God's doing, we don't want to believe it *is*! But what if something *is* God's doing and we believe that it is *not*? What if something *is* God's mighty act and because it doesn't fit neatly into our understanding and our experience, we believe it is not God's... mighty... act? Well, that's what's going on with these Pharisees – so sure they are that God never heals on the Sabbath... so sure that Moses is God's only spokesman... so sure that anyone born blind is a sinner... and so sure that God just doesn't work through sinners. So sure of these things that they miss what is happening right under their noses.

⁹ Ibid.

Scene 6

³⁵Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶“Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” ³⁸Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. ³⁹Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” ⁴⁰Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?” ⁴¹Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

Meditation

A writer once visited the classroom of visually impaired children. Deeply troubled by what he saw, the man remarked, “It must be terrible to go through life without eyes.” One little girl quickly responded, “Yes, but not half as bad as having two good eyes but still not being able to see.”¹⁰ There are two kinds of blindness. The first kind of blind is physical... one can't see rocks and trees and people. The second kind of blind is moral, spiritual... one cannot see outside of their box and thus run the risk of missing what God is doing in the world. Most of us are the one and not the other. The question is... is there hope? John Claypool thinks so. He writes, “Something can be done if we are serious. We can bring our eyes to the One who made them, admit that we have underused them... and misused them and abused them in a thousand ways, and then discover the greatest truth in the world – that it is never too late with God. It is still possible that these eyes of ours can see aright and if that begins to happen, this is the first step toward ‘inheriting the Kingdom prepared for us from the foundations of the earth.’ Would that not be something – if he could fix our seeing, too... wouldn’t it be something if he could open these eyes of ours so we might truly see? May it be so, Lord. May it be so!”

Charge and Benediction

Contrary to what some say, the Pharisees were not bad people. In fact, like us they were really pretty good people. They just had a system... a system they thought God had given them... a system that made sense to them and worked for them. The thing is that system closed Jesus out and closed them in... not in outer darkness, but in inner darkness – because their fear of being wrong kept them from recognizing what was right beneath their noses – the Messiah ... the very Light of the World. Meanwhile, the formerly blind man was looking right at it and said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. Friends, this very drama repeats itself countless times in our lives... and each time we get to try out for a different part... the part that sees the dazzling light and says: “Did you see that? Did you see what God has done?” Because friends, worship begins with wonder and awe, not suspicion.

¹⁰ From a sermon “Sight for Sore Eyes” by George A. Turner, 10 March 2002.