

"Surely We Are Not Blind?"
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
March 2, 2008
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Scripture: John 9:1-41

It is a story, first, of dislocation and confusion. It is a story of an identity crisis set in the shadows, with lighting that makes it difficult to see what is real and what is only imagined. It is a story of "baffling blindness"¹ and a cure that creates the dislocation.

Once there was a man blind from birth, who made the little living he could make begging on the street. A few alms here, a few alms there – it added up, and allowed him a meager existence. We have all seen our share of beggars waiting along the streets, have we not? We have seen beggars, asking for money for food, or to help them get home, or for who knows what. We have seen beggars, and wondered what to do.

Well, one day Jesus was walking along the road with his disciples, and noticed this particular blind man, begging by the road. Without a word between the two of them, Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and then spread the mud on the man's eyes. Only then did Jesus speak directly to the man, telling him to "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." So the man leaves the scene and goes and washes in the pool and returned, able to see. And with the blindness gone, the confusion sets in.

Can you imagine what it must be like after a life of blindness, after years and years of having things described to you by others, to encounter a stranger who puts mud put in your eyes, tells you to wash in the pool, and suddenly you can see? How startling that must have been, completely unexpected, unrequested, unhoped for – sudden sight after years of blindness. Can you imagine the questions he must have asked himself as he regained sight? Was this just temporary? Was it a mirage or a dream? Why him? And who did this? And why did it not happen earlier? Suddenly the horizons were open, and he had to consider what it meant for his life. He could not simply keep on with life as if nothing had happened.

If it was confusing for him, it was confounding to his neighbors.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' (John 9:8-10)

He had become so familiar to them, begging by the side of the road, always in the same place day after day. And now, suddenly, they realized that they had never really looked at him before. They had simply accepted his presence, grown accustomed to him without ever really knowing him. And now there was a man that

claimed to be that man, formerly blind, now healed. "It is he," some said. "Not, but it is someone [who looks] like him," others said. But they all knew that blind men don't suddenly see, and beggars do not suddenly get up and have their lives transformed.

And so this man, who had neither requested healing nor money from Jesus, suddenly found himself healed and unknown and the subject of intense debate. The neighbors brought him to the Pharisees, who asked him the same questions. These questions, repeated so often now had an edge as he found himself in the midst of a religious conflict. What happened exactly? How did you receive your sight? And what about this man who healed you? They were confused, and the questions betrayed their anger over the unordinary. He must have been confused to suddenly be the target of their insistent questioning. Why him? Who was he becoming?

Underneath this confusion, Frederick Niedner writes, "a shameful but universal lie lingers in the air throughout its several scenes."² We usually do not admit it out loud, but deep within us we tend to think that we deserve all the gifts of life: wealth and a good job and a loving family, but also the basic gifts of sight, hearing and taste. And so when we see someone who is poor and begging, or blind or sick, a primitive part in us wonders what they did to deserve their condition. And many harbor nagging suspicions when confronted with a diagnosis at the doctor's office of assuming that the illness is a punishment for doing something wrong.

This story is about identity, but the healing also serves to begin an extended discourse on the nature of sin. When Jesus and his disciples first saw the blind man, they did not talk to him, but amongst themselves they asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). If blindness is a punishment, which it was assumed, then whose fault was it? If he was born blind, could it be his fault? Or was it his parents fault? Assumption: the blindness was the result of sin – the only question was whose sin it was.

But he is not the only sinner in the story. The blind man finds himself in pretty good company, for when the Pharisees hear about Jesus healing the blind man, they quickly label Jesus himself a sinner, for breaking the Sabbath rules. If he did heal him, which they debated, and if he healed him on the Sabbath, which was what the formerly blind man claimed, well, then the one thing they do know is that Jesus was a sinner.

And, at the end of the story, as the Pharisees and Jesus argue, Jesus claims his purpose. "I came into this world [Jesus told them] for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." And so, in a story that began with the blind man labeled a sinner, included Jesus being labeled a sinner by the Pharisees, concludes with Jesus saying that the Pharisees, those who say that they see, but miss the point -- that they remain in sin.

This story, so consumed as the characters are about the nature of sin begins with an age-old question discussed by psychotherapists and biblical authors. Do children bear the sins of their parents? As it is put in Exodus 20:5, does God "visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children"? There is the story of King David, who seduced Bathsheba and sent her husband off to the frontlines of battle to be killed. David and Bathsheba had a child from this illicit affair (or rape). And the child was born with an illness and died at a few days old, which David interpreted as God's punishment.

And sometimes it does happen that way, at least in terms of consequences and outcomes. Genes determine blue or brown eyes. Genes also pass on deadly

conditions. The activities of parents during pregnancy can be harmful to a child prior to birth. Fetal alcohol syndrome. Babies exposed to meth or heroin or prescription drugs before they even had a chance at a healthy life. But despite the Biblical passages that support the notion and our understanding of parenting outcomes, Jesus refutes the notion that this man's blindness was caused by sin.

Sin and sight. A sight that reveals reality that is only skin deep. Blindness and sight mingling in this story so that the community and the boundaries between people are no longer clear. The phrase in the story, first uttered by the formerly blind man now forms a line of the favorite hymn for most American Christians, "I once was blind, but now I see."

Amazing grace, not deserved or even requested, that transforms blindness into clear vision. It was not popular to be an abolitionist in England in the 1700's and 1800's. The recent movie, *Amazing Grace*, tells the story of William Wilberforce who led the effort in Parliament to abolish the slave trade. His ally was John Newton, a former slave ship captain who had seen the light and wrote these words.³ "I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see." Slavery was so accepted, justified by common practice and stories in the Bible, that those who first were able to see slavery for what it really was were labeled troublemakers. Now, of course, our vision has changed. And now we can all see the evils of slavery. But at first it was only those brave discredited folks who could see slavery for what it was and help others see beyond slavery.

A totally different example of changing eyesight is about how we care for babies. So much changes over the years. We don't understand all there is to know about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, but we do know that it is much safer for babies to go to sleep on their backs. And it is hard to believe that some years prior, it was commonly recommended, for other health reasons to do exactly the opposite. "Back to sleep," is now the common phrase to remind parents of this important safety rule, but it was not always the case.

These two examples, SIDS and Slavery – very different examples – are reminders to me that what we take for granted today may be obviously wrong, even immoral in the future. There are things we do today, things we take for granted, for which our children and grandchildren will be ashamed. "Surely we are not blind?" the Pharisees asked with self-righteousness and anger (John 9:40). And we may join them in saying those very same words, "surely we are not blind?" Yet young parents have to teach their parents about new child safety precautions. And our grandchildren may well ask why we did not do more to stop global warming and provide better health care and end the sins of racism and homophobia and gender discrimination. "Surely we are not blind?"

No longer recognized by his neighbors and feared by his parents, the healed blind man would have to find a new identity and a new community. The story serves as an illustration of what is supposed to happen with baptism. The blind man encounters Jesus, who sends him to a pool to wash, and then he can see. And in baptism, we gain a different level of seeing. Baptism dislocates us from the ways of the world, and helps us to see things from the perspective of God. But for some, baptism comes at a cost. For some it requires a new community, a new set of friends, a different identity. For some, baptism will leave old neighbors wondering if you are even the same person.

“When did you start caring about the plight of slaves?” some asked Wilberforce. “When did you start caring about the poor?” they may ask today. “When did you start saying hello to strangers on the street?”

The hard truth of this story for the blind man was that his encounter with Jesus caused dislocation and forced him to create a new identity. What even to call himself, no longer “blind man.” And “the man formerly known to have been blind from birth” seems an identity rooted in the past. Amidst the suspicion of his neighbors and the grilling of the Pharisees, he would have to find a new community of support and a new identity for himself after encountering Jesus.

Life after an encounter with Jesus is not easy. It challenges the easy ways of getting along with the crowd. It challenges our motivations and our desires. It is so easy to give in to our temptations and do things the easy way. But we are not left alone. In the midst of being grilled by his neighbors and the Pharisees, Jesus found the blind man, and came to him. That is why the church is so important. Shaping our values, holding us when life is hard, challenging us when life is easy, giving courage for difficult stands. That is what the church is about – creating a community of people who have encountered Jesus. That is what we are all about – joining together in response to God’s grace. God’s grace that found us when we were lost, and keeps searching for us whenever we go off the path. God’s grace that restores proper eyesight. God’s grace that over and over and over again, questions the things we see with certainty and leads us into deeper vision.

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.

¹ Words used by Frederick Niedner in The Christian Century’s “Living the Word” column 26 February, 2008, 20.

² Niedner. In addition to direct quotes, the trajectory of this sermon is indebted to Niedner’s commentary on this passage.

³ This is the corrected version. I misspoke as I delivered the sermon, giving credit to Wilberforce for writing the words to Amazing Grace.