

Seekers, Sinners, Saints: Profiles in Faith (IV)
He Longed for Sight
A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
2 March 2008
Text: John 9:1-41

As a crossword puzzle fan, I've seen a recurring clue for "words of understanding,"---and the correct answer, "I see." Physical sight has long been a metaphor for knowledge and insight, and blindness, the opposite: ignorance and prejudice. Of course it doesn't always work that neatly: when one sense is diminished, others often become stronger as if to compensate. And as blind singer-songwriter-pianist Stevie Wonder notes, "Just because someone lacks the use of his eyes doesn't mean he lacks vision." You have only to spend a little time with Dorothy Dickey, Jack Desmond, Edna Strnad or others in our congregation with sight impairment to "see" the truth of that observation.

The biblical text this morning leads with this ages-old metaphor as Jesus encounters a man who had been blind from birth. But when all is said and done, traditional notions of sight and blindness have been turned upside down. The blind ones see and the ones who think they "get it" are revealed to be in darkness. As we continue our sermon series on a search for authentic faith, we must face our personal blind spots, the parts of our souls that are stunted from lack of light, and the troubling possibility that we prefer the familiar blindness than the piercing light that exposes our vulnerability and need. The biblical text is long, so I'll read it in sections, making comments in between. Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the ninth chapter at the first verse. [READ JOHN 9:1-7]

The incident begins reasonably enough with a question about the origin of suffering. The disciples express the conventional wisdom of their time (and one that persists today) that illness or calamity must be the result of sin. They wonder, for the record, whether it was the man's sin or the inherited sin of his parents that resulted in his condition. But Jesus doesn't seem terribly interested in a theological debate about the issue: he says plainly, it isn't anyone's fault. Commenting on Jesus' claim that the man was born blind "to reveal God's works," former senior pastor at Riverside Church James Forbes observes, "that's why all of us are born: so that the works of God might be revealed in us." God takes us however we are and makes us instruments of divine peace, love and justice. Here Jesus heals the man's blindness to illustrate his declaration "I am the light of the world." All's well that ends well.

But no. Turns out this isn't a simple healing story like so many others in the gospels. Now the scene shifts into argument and controversy; first, over whether or not this miraculous healing actually happened. You know: if you can't explain it, it must be a trick.

[READ JOHN 9:8-12]

The plot thickens as the neighbors can't agree on what has happened, so they appeal to a "higher authority." They bring the former blind man to the Pharisees, those wise and learned religious leaders.

[READ JOHN 9:13-34]

One thing that is fascinating about this conflict is the opposite directions the arguments take their proponents. The religious leaders become increasingly rigid in their judgments about both the former blind man and Jesus. First they attempt to discredit Jesus by pointing out that he broke the Sabbath law by "working"—that is, by performing the task of healing. When that doesn't get them anywhere, they interrogate the man and his parents to see if Jesus has prompted the connection people are sure to make—between his healing of blindness and the long-promised Savior who would "Bring light to the world."

Finally as if to get rid of evidence to the contrary, they drive the man out of their presence. In their certainty they are the true blind ones. In their refusal to consider a new way of seeing, they remain limited and disabled.

But notice how the former blind man's perspective gradually changes. At first he is tentative, telling only the facts ("he put mud on my eyes...I washed....I see"). He seems a little lost in the sermonizing; he seems unable or unwilling to refute or affirm a position. With growing confidence, he says what he does know: that once he was blind, but now he sees. In telling the truth as he had experienced it, his own vision becomes clearer. He comes to see that Jesus speaks God's word with authority "as a prophet." And finally....

[READ JOHN 9:35-41]

This story abounds with irony. The blind see. The sighted are blind to the truth. And it's this irony that frames the text's relevance for us today. Where are you and I in it? Every time I've read it, I've identified with the blind man, eyes wide open, rejoicing that though I once was blind, *now I see*. Now I'm one of the sighted ones, an insider—not like those sorry Pharisees who just don't get it. But what would be different if you and I acknowledged a teensy-weensy bit of kinship with their adamant perspective, suspicion of new insight, and arrogant assurance that when all is said and done, we're right?—that we are, well, *entitled* to God's grace and blessing? Surely, we're not blind....are we?

Yet over and over in Scripture, the insiders, the ones with a sense of entitlement, the hard-working, law-abiding, church-going faithful find it difficult to "see" God at work, and get annoyed when they notice how the down-and-out, the prodigal children, the sinners, the losers, and the bad girls slouch in and are welcomed with the open arms. It's not that God loves them "more," but they more readily recognize their profound need for God's healing work. And when you think about it, why would you bother to seek the truth if you thought you already had it?

Why pray for healing if you don't know you're sick? The movement within this biblical narrative demands that we consider the possibility. Within its 41 verses, there are no fewer than 18 questions—and a wide variety of responses. Curiously, Jesus is not even present from the point of healing until the very end; yet he is clearly the main point of the discussion. We cannot avoid the question put to the former blind man:*and what do YOU say about Jesus?*

Friends, spiritual vision begins with a recognition of our blindness, our need for Christ's healing touch. We acknowledge we don't know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth...so, HELP US GOD! Our doubt; our not-knowing open a space for God to come and help us. God's grace is amazing only to the extent that it is unearned and undeserved.

And then there's the shock and upset of what the world looks like once your eyes are opened. Neurologist Oliver Sacks described some of the quirks and quandaries of the human brain in his best-selling book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Elsewhere he has written about his patient Virgil, a man blind from birth who in his 50th year was operated upon and became sighted. But it did not lead to the healing everyone expected. His "sight" was confusing. He could see colors and movements but arranging them in a coherent picture was difficult. The process of learning to identify objects was slowed by entrenched thought patterns developed through blindness. Sacks comments, "One must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person." (*from Oliver Sacks, An Anthropologist in Mars*)

Sacks' language resonates with the language of Christian faith, of experiencing the grace of God as a kind of re-birth, the gift of new eyes. Sometimes with a flash of insight, but more often with a gradual dawning of awareness, our blind spots are revealed and we come to see ourselves as we truly are; and also the One who can heal us. It happens on a personal level, but also on the broader, community level, as we confront the

prejudices and perspectives we hold by virtue of our social and economic place. How do the realities of being American, well-educated, and affluent limit our sight and blind us to our need for God? You may know the story of how the beloved hymn *Amazing Grace* came to be written. John Newton was the captain of a ship which transported by his own records over 1600 African men, women, and children to slavery in the Americas. His friendship with Christian abolitionist William Wilberforce caused him to understand the depravity of human trafficking, and his responsibility for perpetrating this evil. He spent the last half of his life working for the end of the slave trade, and growing in the life-saving reality of God's grace.

Friends, with infinite love, God offers to remove our blinders. In Christ, we see the Light of the World. It is a light that exposes our darkness, personal and communal. But it is also a light that illumines our lives and reveals a path to a bright new day. We may see only one step ahead, but let us resolve to take it, and by God's grace, we will find the way home, together.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

How does a congregation's worship provide spiritual vision and insight for its members? Sometimes we forget about the powerful potential of word and sacrament to nurture the individual's life and faith. Reformed worship holds together both the preached Word of God and the Sacraments that symbolize our life in God. Even though we don't celebrate baptism or the Lord's Supper every time we gather, all that we proclaim from the pulpit flows from our identity as God's beloved people and our communion with God through Jesus Christ. Along with scripture and sermon, baptism and communion extend an invitation to know Christ and live in the world as his disciples.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has called upon all its member congregations to engage in five practices which can open us to God's work for our spiritual growth and renewal. The five disciplines are:

- 1) to set the baptism font in full view of the congregation;
- 2) to open it and fill it with water every time God's people gather;
- 3) to set the chalice and the plate on the communion table every time we gather;
- 4) to lead appropriate parts of worship from the font and from the table; and
- 5) increase the number of Sundays on which the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

While we already follow these practices, I think we may be surprised to discover the spiritual nourishment and formation springing from a deeper understanding of them. Neurological research suggests that the repeated action of rituals strengthens mental paths that actually stimulate new creativity. As we celebrate the Lord's Supper today, I invite you to be particularly aware of the connection between the words and action—what broken bread and poured out cup mean as "the bread of life" and "the cup of salvation"....FOR YOU. *O taste and see that the Lord is good!*

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor