

Pastor's Message – 3/19/2023
John 9

Quite a few years ago, I realized that my singing voice wasn't what it used to be. I could still compensate with experience, but I had to work harder at getting my voice to do what I wanted it to do, so I began to wonder what I would do when my voice wasn't good enough anymore. It was at that time that I purchased a couple of recorders, the ancestor of our modern flute, thinking that when my voice failed, I could play recorder.

As human beings age, most people realize they can't do what they were once able to do with ease. Our bodies begin to wear out and, maybe we can't see to drive at night like we used to. Maybe we can't hear as well as we once did. Eyeglasses and hearing aids can help, but they sometimes aren't enough. Blindness or deafness can be the result.

I wonder sometimes which of my senses I'd miss most: seeing or hearing. I think probably hearing, since music is so important to me. There is a difference, I'm sure between losing one's sight and being born blind. The man in our gospel story today, John tells us, was born blind. Jesus' larger point, a more individual question, asks us how we are blind. Is our blindness accidental, blind from birth, or is our blindness by choice?

There are at least three points of view in John's story today and maybe four: that of the disciples of Jesus, the neighbors who had known the blind beggar and his family since the man was born; a small group of Pharisees and maybe that of the blind man himself. Each point of view responds in a different way to Jesus' healing of the blind man.

The Pharisees get all bogged down in who Jesus is and then how can He heal. Only a sinner would do any work on the Sabbath: their Sunday. The Messiah or a righteous man, a good Jew, certainly wouldn't break the Law against doing work on the Sabbath. Therefore, Jesus couldn't have any connection with God; He certainly couldn't be the Messiah. But without having a connection with God, no one could have done the healing that Jesus did. They are stuck in a conundrum. So they have to deny that any healing took place. It wasn't the same man. There are traditions, you know, "We've never done it that way before. That's not the way we do things," blinded them to the possibility of seeing God's hand at work.

The disciples only see what they can see. The man is blind, therefore, he (or his parents for he was born blind) must have sinned. End of story; no further discussion needed. And then they disappear from the story.

The man's parents are afraid of losing what they have: their place in the community which is their synagogue. So they pass the buck, 'His parents replied, "We know this is our son and that he was born blind, but we don't know how he can see or who healed him. Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself (vs. 20-21)."' They are blinded by fear.

The blind man is healed, comes to believe in Jesus, tells the story, is thrown out of the community that was never his and welcomed into another. The long story from John today suggests that not only this man, but actually all of us are born spiritually blind. But in a powerful way, it also shows us God's way of healing our blindness, and not ours only, but that of the whole world.

Jesus does not wait for this man to ask to heal him. Jesus has been sent by God to do God's works in the world (verse 4), and that is what he does. He goes to the man, makes mud from dirt and his own spit, places mud on the man's eyelids, and tells him to go wash in the pool called Siloam, which means **Sent**. The man does all of these things, and finds himself not only healed but indeed **sent** to proclaim the truth about his healing. He does not become a disciple of Jesus per se until later in the story. For the majority of the story, he is simply bearing witness to what has happened to him. He was blind; now he sees, thanks to Jesus.

The man was blind and was not aware that he could be healed; He had no idea that Jesus could heal him.

There is a classic psychological tool called the Johari Window. That tool suggests that there are things that we know that we know we know. There are things about ourselves that we don't know but others know. There are secrets that we keep from others and finally, there are things about ourselves, ways that we react to unforeseen circumstances which we can neither predict nor can others. We are not always aware of our blindnesses.

However, hearts open to God's healing grace make us aware of our blindnesses, and open us to their healing, even in those places where we have been blind from birth. There are many ways to be blind or become blind. Some of them are physical. Others are intellectual, emotional, or spiritual. The good news is there are also many ways to see, even to see fairly clearly, even when we are blind, and even when that blindness is physical. But we cannot do it alone. We need one another. We need the Lord.

The man born blind needed Jesus to put mud on his eyes and send him to wash in the pool called "Sent." All of us, swimming in a sea of profound evil and darkness, need the jolt of God's light, and indeed are empowered to become such jolts of light to expose just how deadly the evil around us can be.

Just as there may be four different points of view in the miracle story today, there may be four different ways to respond to life. We can be nit-pickers, wound-lickers, goodness-sakers or arm-wavers. Out of the same situation, considering the same circumstances, there can be four entirely different reactions.

Nit-pickers are always noting what is wrong with something and someone rather than what is right. They can't enjoy anything, especially anything that has a flaw in it. With little sense of humor these pickiness-people are always looking for spiritual or theological or moral "gotchas" to flaunt at others. The nit-pickers in John's story of the blind man's healing are the Pharisees at the first inquisition (v.16). Instead of rejoicing with the man at the miracle of regained sight, they can only focus on the possible Torah infringements that might have made it possible.

An accomplished **nit-picker** can burst any celebratory balloon. "The wedding was so beautiful; such a shame the groom couldn't have lost a few pounds for the occasion." "Congratulations on your new promotion. But you've still got an awful lot of the ladder to climb, don't you?" "The new sanctuary looks wonderful. Of course, we'll probably never grow enough to fill it or pay for it!" Deflating joy, tarnishing triumphs - that's what nit-pickers do best.

Remember getting a mosquito bite or a small scratch when you were a kid and then having to listen to your parents' repeated, "now don't pick at it." Of course, they had to keep telling you because there is something self-destructively fascinating about an open wound. We are drawn to it, we want to mess with it, re-examine it, pull off the scab a little at a time to see how it is healing. But this fixation can easily lead to infection - even to death.

When the Pharisees in John 9:18 recall the healed man's parents as possible witnesses against his previous condition of blindness, they are being **wound-lickers**. They cannot leave the situation alone, but return to it, trying to expose some imagined wrongfulness. These Pharisees do not even realize that the wound they are re-opening is the gaping hole of their own ignorance and spiritual bankruptcy.

When I was in college, I sang the part of one of the fathers in the musical, "The Fantastiks." In the song, "Never Say No," one of the verses went, "Why did the kids put beans in their ears, no one can hear with beans in their ears, after a while the reason appears, they did it 'cause we said 'No.'"

There is a distinct category of people who inspire similar kinds of contrary behavior in most of us. These are the "**goodness-sakers**" - those self-appointed crusaders for the promotion of righteousness. They consider themselves - and let all the rest of us know it - to be super-spiritual. Historian H. G. Wells complained about people he called "the goodness-sakers." These were people who stood around saying, "For goodness sake, why doesn't somebody do something." Or "For goodness sake, look at what they're doing."

Few people can be as infuriating and sin-provoking as goodness-sakers. Smart-aleck remarks and visions of dirty tricks seem to float to the top of our minds all by themselves as we listen to the platitudes and puffed-up piety goodness-sakers blow at us. The Pharisees in John's story haughtily invoke their relationship to Moses as a sign of their spiritual superiority (v. 28). The healed man, who had shown great self-control up to this point, is at last driven to jab back at these upright, up-tight self-appointed guardians of do-gooding. As usual with goodness-sakers, however, they don't even get the point of the sarcasm directed their way.

The story of the blind man and Jesus and a group of Pharisee leaders is a classic illustration of that old saying, "Can't see the forest for the trees." Though in this case, they may have missed the trees for the forest. They could not see what was right in front of them. Because these Pharisee leaders were out to get Jesus, as John tells us, they not only could not see the power of God at work in what Jesus did, but they did not even imagine that a miraculous healing had taken place.

The conclusion of today's gospel reading gives a solemn reminder of where we started. The Pharisees in the story are complaining about the healing of the man born blind, seeking to discredit both the man healed and Jesus, the healer. When some of them ask Jesus whether he is suggesting they are blind he says, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you saw, 'We see,' your sin remains." Protesting they (and they alone) can see aright, Jesus is saying, simply reveals their fundamental hardness of heart, and so, in fact, their blindness, a blindness about which they are not even aware, and a blindness that keeps them bound in sin's power. As long as they seek to justify themselves, their hearts are hardened, and they cannot possibly see. As long as we seek to justify

ourselves, as long as we think that we can save ourselves by our good works, our hearts are likewise hardened, and we cannot possibly see aright, either.

Perhaps the purpose of the story is to ask ourselves to consider if or how we blind ourselves to the work of God in the world. The man's physical blindness has nothing to do with the sin, but thinking that you understand or saying that you understand when you don't, when you're not willing to take off your blinders, is part of your sin.

It's noteworthy to read how the man's parents pass the buck. But we also fear those things as well: fear losing someone's respect or our place in the community or in the church by taking a stand which may have consequences. What's blindness for me and you? How can a relationship with Jesus be a healing moment in that blindness?

"Anyone saying Jesus was the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue," our reading says. And it happens, the man healed of blindness is thrown out. There may be times when we can be put out because we confess Jesus as the Messiah. There is a cost to being healed; there is a cost to salvation.

In addition to nit-pickers, wound-lickers and goodness-sakers there are also **arm-wavers**. These are the people that celebrate victories and lend support in times of defeat. Arm-wavers hoot and holler when their child's Little League team wins the big game - but they also give great hugs and "it's O.K." looks when the team loses 10 in a row. It's not that arm-wavers don't see all the imperfections in that hand-knit, size 98 sweater or in life. It's just that they focus on all the beauty that surrounds the flaws instead of the flaws themselves.

It is amazing how arm-wavers are absent for so long from John's story of the healed blind man. Here is a stunning miracle - a man blind since birth suddenly given sight - and no one celebrates. His neighbors are doubtful, his parents are worried about the religious and legal ramifications, while the Pharisees find the whole episode threatening and foreboding. Not until the healed man himself finally realizes who Jesus is and what his presence means do we get the first sign of arm-waving. Indeed, when Jesus' identity finally sinks in, the man offers a full body-wave - he falls on his knees and worships the "Lord" (verse 38).

I think we are all called to be "arm-wavers." I think we are all called to keep our eyes open for those moments when God is at work in a special way in our lives, in the lives of others and in our Church. I think we are called to celebrate these moments and tell the stories of good news that we see when we see it and, in doing that, to give glory to God. The once-blind man was bold to speak the truth when he saw it. How bold are we to tell the good news of God-at-work among us?

Jesus comes to each of us to open our eyes and hearts to the presence of God among us. When our eyes and hearts are open and we see Jesus we can no longer ignore God's presence and His call to us to tell the story of God's good news. We are no longer free to be blind to what God would have us say and do: that in spite of our blindness, Jesus comes and reveals the presence of God-with-us. Our blindnesses are healed and give us a reason to share the good News of how we are healed and Who has healed us.