

“Perfect Vision”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver for the
First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 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?’ He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’ They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, ‘He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.’ Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’ His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’ His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the

Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

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 worshipped 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.

Some of my earliest memories revolve around vision:

My first glasses case, from when I was a little boy, featured a smiling astronaut who was holding on to a flag he had just planted on the moon. Funny that I remember that, but not what my glasses look like!

My ophthalmologist for a time was a doctor called Richard Raskin. That name may not ring any bells for you, but perhaps Renee Richards will. Yes, when she was a he, she was my eye doctor before she became a professional tennis player.

I also recall eye surgery for my amblyopia, or ‘lazy eye’ in the vernacular. This occurred when I was six or seven. I actually don’t have memories of the procedure itself, just having some vanilla ice cream afterwards, and wearing an eye patch during part of my recovery period.

But most of all, I honestly cannot recall a time when I did not wear corrective lenses. In some ways, my faulty eyes have been a source of disappointment. Back when I was younger, one needed perfect vision to be a fighter pilot, so early dreams of being catapulted off the deck on an aircraft carrier at the controls of a jet had to be abandoned. As an adult, wearing glasses while engaging in sports, whether running or playing basketball, can be just plain frustrating. The perspiration on the lenses can be *very* distracting. And before you ask, contacts are not an option for me. So I’m stuck wearing glasses.

Oddly enough, I am grateful, too. I know many people who had to begin wearing glasses or contacts in their twenties or thirties, and they often found the transition to be disorienting, the loss to be unnerving. I’ve never had to deal with these feelings, because I have never known any other reality. Glasses were and are the norm.

You may wonder if I ever blamed anyone. My parents for their faulty genes? No, since this wasn’t something they planned. Well, you might ask, how about God? God must be responsible, especially if he’s all-powerful. But again I say no. That is not how I understand God works. Well, how about ... me? Wasn’t I born in sin? Am I not fallen? Our thinking on this topic has been influenced by Saint Augustine. But as much respect as I have for the faith and brilliance of the man, I believe his theory of Original Sin reflects too much time spent as a Manichaean – ten years – before he converted to the Christian faith, and that time profoundly shaped his thinking and theology.

Further, consider today’s lesson of the man who was blind from birth. At the beginning of today’s lesson, we read, *As he walked along, [Jesus] saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.*

Right at the top of today's lesson, Jesus dismisses the idea that the man's sins or his parent's sins were the reason for his affliction. Reading this, of course, one might draw the conclusion that the blind man was made to suffer because he was just a tool, that God was using him to make a point that in some way he would be used to reveal God's mighty works or reflect his glory. That might seem possible, if one believes that the God of Israel and Jesus was almighty – and cared nothing for his people. And back in John 3:16, we were told how ... *God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* Something here doesn't make sense. Does God use us or does God love us? This disjunction in the text is puzzling – until we consider Koine, or Biblical, Greek was written without any kind of punctuation or break between sentences. As with Biblical Hebrew, translators have made assumptions when rendering the text into English, some of which shape our interpretations or lead to misunderstanding.

Gary Burge, a dean at Calvin Theological Seminary, and formerly a long-time New Testament professor at Wheaton College, writes in his commentary on John,

“... the “purpose clause” of 9:3b (“so that the work of God ...”) can just as well be applied to 9:4, and not doubt should. Such clauses (introduced by Gk. *Hina*) may begin the main sentence rather than follow it. Of eleven uses of the Gk. *all' hina* (“but so that,” 9:3b) in John, four of them precede their main sentence (1:31, 13:18, 14:31, 15:25). If 9:2-4 follows this pattern, we may translate it as follows, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus. ‘But so that the work of God might be displayed in his life, we must do the work of him who sent me while it is still day.’”

The purpose clause now explains that Jesus must work so that God's work may displayed in the man's life. God had not made the man blind in order to show his glory; rather, God has sent Jesus to do works of healing in order to show his glory. *Pp. 272-3, John (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000)*

We can now set aside the interpretive conundrum, knowing that faulty translation or more specifically, the misapplication of punctuation, is the cause of our problem. So, if we know that God did not inflict this affliction upon the

man because of anybody's sins, what are we to think? Is the universe just plain unfair, or random? These aren't idle questions: as we consider the coronavirus outbreak today – what are we to think? Is the suffering part of some master plan, of God's grand design, which we may not know, but serves his purpose? I think not.

In fact, this text argues otherwise. We who interpret Scripture, and look for God's work in the world, must be careful and cautious. We are sailing in dangerous waters.

Think of how the Pharisees acted in this story. They seemed to want nothing more than to condemn Jesus, to protect their interpretation, their reputations, to be seen as right. As with Nicodemus a couple of weeks ago, they were held hostage to their knowledge and learning. Unlike Nicodemus, they didn't recognize that perhaps they still had something to learn.

This passage is quite clear about what it means to see things clearly, to have 20/20 eyesight, or perfect vision. Seeing things not only involves using our eyes, but also our hearts and minds. It is something that occurs on many levels. Consider the once-blind man. It is not clear from the text, and I doubt those who casually read or hear his passage notice, that *two* miracles occur when Jesus restores the man's sight: he is able to see – and somehow, though blind since birth, he seems able to *process and recognize* everything he sees!

The Pharisees, though able to see the world around them, had blinkered vision. Rather than rejoice or even be surprised by the miracle that had occurred, they sought to poke holes in it ... because it was done on the sabbath. Their understanding of the law was narrow and limited. They focused on the 'what' of the sabbath regulations, and not on the 'why'. They failed to acknowledge the *reason* for the sabbath, that God ordained and the Torah enshrined the importance of people taking a regular rest from their labors, of setting a time aside to appreciate and give praise for the beauty and wonder of the Creator and his Creation and all in it. Jesus knew the blind man was unable to enjoy or give thanks for God's creation. The Pharisees simply did not care.

Instead, they interrogated the man's parents to make sure he was not a charlatan, then the man himself. Finally, they 'drove out', in the words of the Gospel, the

man from the synagogue as a heretic because of the miracle he had experienced and will not renounce.

To these theological know-it-alls, there was nothing to discuss: they were 'disciples of Moses' and, to them, Jesus was not. They were in the circle, Jesus and the once-blind man were not. But of course, this is not true. Why by adhering to Jesus is someone no longer a disciple of Moses? Surely, Jesus would say he was. And more to the point, is not the focus of our worship to be God and not Moses? The great lawgiver who delivered Israel from bondage did so at God's behest, drawing on God's power, making clear it was the LORD, and not he, Moses, who performed miracles. We cannot in good conscience say what Moses would have thought of Jesus, but I believe that in any case he would have been appalled by these religious legal eagles and nitpickers.

Let us recall that in Matthew 5, Jesus made clear that he came not to overthrow the law but to fulfill it. In short, in Jesus *new things could be seen*. The once-blind man recognized this, the Pharisees did not.

It was because of this new sight that at the end of the story the once-blind man, wanting to know who the Son of Man might be, believed in and worshipped Jesus when he learned the man who healed him was more than a healer, more than a miracle worker, but was indeed the Son of Man himself. It has been said that this unnamed fellow was the first convert. Surely, he showed all the traits that came to be expected of a convert; he confessed, he experienced, he believed, he worshipped. We do not know what became of this man, but his soul was touched by Jesus and thus his life was transformed.

So why spend so much time on this story today? Why is this reading appointed for the Lenten season? Well, there are themes that have been with us these last weeks: light contrasted with darkness (Jesus and Nicodemus, and Jesus and the Woman at the Well), of spiritual questing (Nicodemus, the Woman at the Well), of suspicious parties (the Pharisees, the Samaritan woman's neighbors), and we pick these tropes up again in today's reading (here Jesus says explicitly that he is the light of the world, the once-blind man comes to believe in Jesus, the Pharisees are hostile). But more than that there is a stark lesson for us here: Contrary to what we might infer from passages like today's, Jesus had nothing against experts *per se*. Rather his issue with the teachers of his day, and it is a

pitfall that can just as easily trip us up as it did the Pharisees long ago, is one of spiritual blindness; of a self-confidence that borders on arrogance.

Jesus in today's lesson is encouraging us to take risks for the sake of our faith, yet to be humble in the professions of that faith. There was, of course, a perfectly simple explanation for the man's blindness: we just don't know what it was. Genetics, river blindness, or some other condition – but it appeared to be a medical condition and not a reflection of the man's sins. We should never look at a person's infirmities as a sign of Divine disfavor. That is surely just a way for us to feel superior to another, without justification. And that is a sin.

Recall that in John 8:7, when confronted with people who wanted to stone a woman accused of adultery, Jesus said, ... *Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.* His call to introspection and reflection contained a message that every person in every age needs to reckon with: we must each confront and address our own sinful state. What better time of year than Lent for us to hear and respond to this call to repent?

Before we judge others, we should judge ourselves. To do that, we will need new eyes. Otherwise, we will never have perfect vision but will be blind to God's love, and grace, and saving power. Let us be like the once-blind man, and not like the Pharisees. Let us look and truly see.