

Experiencing Jesus: Fresh Vision
John 9:1-41
March 2, 2008

Eager to learn everything they can from their teacher, the disciples use a blind man on the street as an object lesson. “Tell us, Good Teacher, who committed the sin that caused this man’s blindness?” In the culture of the day, it was assumed that illness was a punishment for wrongdoing. Persons who were sick were presumed to be outside the boundary of God’s holy community. The sick violate God’s command and desire: “You shall be holy [exclusive and whole], for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Those afflicted with problems such as blindness or lameness were excluded from approaching God. Those most in need of God’s compassion and care were considered unworthy of it. This was the human perspective.

But as usual, Jesus offers a different perspective, a godly viewpoint. Jesus says, “This man’s impairment is not a matter of sin. Neither he nor his parents are being punished for any misdeeds. Let me show you how God desires to relate to this man. God wants to shed light into this man’s dark night so that he is delivered from bondage and freed for new life. Because his illness has been the cause of exclusion from his religious community, the meaning in his life has been diminished. As the Light of the World, I have come to draw him into the embrace of God in a way that he has never known,” says Jesus.

Then he spits on the ground and makes a mud cake to spread on the man’s eyes. He sends the man to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does as Jesus instructs and returns able to see. The way that John tells the story, it appears that a physical cure is experienced. In addition Jesus dares to do what the religious leaders of that day would never do: include the outcast in the sacred circle of God’s beloved. With this inclusion, the man born blind receives fresh vision. He is granted a new perspective on life which restores meaning that had been robbed from him.

The man’s sight or insight improves as the story unfolds. First, he names the Giver of this gift as “the man called Jesus.” Upon further questioning he proclaims, “He is a prophet.” Finally he testifies, “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” This is too much for the religious leaders. They throw the man out of the synagogue.

Jesus, also not welcomed at the synagogue, finds the man. He asks, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” The man professes, “Lord, I believe.” The man once prevented access to God now finds himself in the very presence of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Not only is he given sight, he is given deep insight. A lonely, empty existence is transformed into a life of meaning and hope. Certainly the physical change is significant, but even more so, the spiritual transformation enables him to view life with new lenses.

The only interaction between Jesus and the man born blind takes place in two short scenes at the beginning and end of the story. In the four scenes comprising the bulk of this drama, other folks struggle to come to terms with this incident. It has the feel of a courtroom drama, with the man having to defend the gift that has been given him. The poor man is peppered with questions: How were your eyes opened? Where is the man who did it? How could he do that? What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? What do you say about him, since he opened your eyes?

The neighbors squabble about whether it is the same man they have known or someone else who happens to look like their neighbor. They take him to the Pharisees, the religious authorities, who are concerned about the technicality of a healing on a Sabbath. Work on the Sabbath is a violation of the Ten Commandments. One who would violate the law of God in such a way cannot be a man of God. The man's parents are called in to testify; they identify their son, but they are unwilling to "go out on a limb" and claim the source of his healing.

The man is called in for a second round of questioning. Emboldened by his experience, he asks the religious authorities if they are considering discipleship under this man, Jesus. Abhorred by the thought, they claim that Moses is God's only spokesman. The man launches into his testimony about the wondrous healing that has taken place in his life. This certainly is a strange phenomenon not known before in the history of humankind. Such a thing could only be done by God, working through someone who worships God and obeys God's will.

Angered by the man's profession of faith, they throw him out. They cannot see as he has come to see. They are unable to witness the amazing works of God in the world. As they close the man out of the temple, they also close out Jesus, and in turn, a fresh vision of God's astonishing work in the world. While the blind becomes sighted, the sighted become blind. Those who claim to have "a corner on God" cannot see the presence of God right before their very eyes.

Most of us would like to identify with the man born blind in the story. We want our maladies healed. But truth be told, most of us are like the skeptics in the story. God is at work in our lives, but we fail to see it. Our expectations are too narrow or broad. We are narrow-sighted when we want things one way: our way. We are blind to the many other wondrous ways in which God is present and active in our lives. We are broad-sighted when we expect God to change the laws of nature in order to intervene in our situation; why should we be so privileged when countless others are not? Like the Pharisees we can live in a closed system that closes Jesus out and closes us in inner darkness.

The story invites us to view life with a fresh vision. Instead of wallowing in the muck of "Why me?" we can change the question to "What now?" Given what is, where do I see God working in this situation? Grieving for what has been lost, we can rejoice in what remains. What is the opportunity for God to be known and seen here? What is God doing and how can I be a part of it?

Dr. Rachel Remen writes of Josh, a gift cancer surgeon who gave the gift of new life to hundreds of others. Josh came for counseling because of depression. Dr. Remen recommended that he review the events of the day for fifteen minutes every evening, asking three questions and writing brief responses in a journal. The three questions are: What surprised me today? What moved me or touched me today? What inspired me today? The key is reliving the day from a new perspective.

Josh struggled with the process and journal but eventually it caught on. In reflection, he began to notice things that surprised, moved or inspired him several hours after they happened. Eventually he began to see them as they actually happened. He related a particular experience with a thirty-eight-year-old woman with ovarian cancer who had undergone major abdominal surgery followed by debilitating chemotherapy. "In the midst of a routine follow-up visit one morning he suddenly saw her for the first time, her four-year-old on her lap and her six-year-old

leaning against her chair. Both little girls were shiny clean, well fed, happy, and obviously well loved. Aware of the profound suffering caused by her chemotherapy, he was deeply moved by the depth of her commitment to mother her children, and for the first time he connected it to the strength of her will to live. After they spoke of her symptoms, he commented, 'You are such a great mother to your kids. Even after all you have been through, there is something very strong in you. I think that power could maybe heal you some day.' She smiled at him, and he realized with a shock that he had never seen her smile before. 'Thank you,' she told him warmly. 'That means a lot to me.'" This simple practice of seeing things with fresh eyes, of listening to hearts, led Josh to discover great insight that made his life far more meaningful.

Dr. Remen concludes, "Most of us lead more meaningful lives than we know. Often finding meaning is not about doing things differently; it is about seeing familiar things in new ways. When we find new eyes, the unsuspected blessing in work we have done for many years may take us completely by surprise. We can see life in many ways: with the eye, with the mind, with the intuition. But perhaps it is only by those who speak the language of meaning, who have remembered how to see with the heart, that life is ever deeply known or served."ⁱ

Even in the midst of life's challenges, Jesus offers us the opportunity to see with fresh vision the meaningful work of God in our lives. Our personal expectations or desires can blind us to God's presence. But if we are truly open and expectant, we will not fail to be surprised and amazed by the gifts we are given.

Let us wash off the blinding mud so that we can view the world with fresh vision and find God in our very midst.

Healing Hands of Jesus, rest upon us. You know our need of your touch conveying the strong assurance of your deep love. Lift up one who has fallen into the depths of despair. Gently caress one who is weary. Tenderly massage one who aches with pain. Wipe the tears of those who grieve. Lead one seeking a home to a place of warmth and safety. Reach out to one who has been estranged from you and pull her into the circle of your care.

Refresh our vision, O God, so that we may see your wondrous works in our world. Clear the fog that clouds our trust in you. Heal us of our unbelief...

ⁱ Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000), pp. 116-119.