

“The Blind Man”

John 9:1-41

Prayer:

Open the eyes of our heart, O God. Help us recognize your presence in our midst. Amen.

The man born blind was out and about in his day. He knew no other life but one that was in darkness. For his entire life, he had to rely on someone around the village to get food, draw water from a well, cross the street and beg at the gates. On that particular day, he heard footsteps approaching him. He could hear people talking – some were asking questions and one with a gentle yet firm voice responding to them. For a moment, he did not pay attention to the conversation, but then something life-changing happened. The blind man felt the touch of unfamiliar hands spreading sticky mud into his eyes. He smelled the revolting odour of mud and spit and tasted the dust of this stranger’s garments. Mud and spit! Are you serious? Who could it be? The man told him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Siloam means the "one who was sent." He felt a few pairs of hands pushing him in the direction of the pool. And then the cool splash of water on his face. With his own hands, he washed away the sticky mud. He couldn’t believe it at first. But he can see! He was healed by Jesus, the one sent by God. The experience of being able to see everything for the first time is surely a moment to celebrate!

The scholar, Carl Gregg, wrote a wonderful commentary on this John passage based on the story of the legendary singer-songwriter Ray Charles, who died at the age of 73 in 2004. Ray was a charismatic, brilliant, and immensely-talented performer. All of his achievements he did them all as a blind man. Despite the fact that a group of angry church goers accused him of blasphemy because of some of the lyrics of his songs, he was still remembered as a music icon and his rendition of “Georgia on My Mind” was made the official state song. But, in the face of his success, one of the many questions raised in Ray Charles’ life is why a black child already born into poverty becomes blind. Did he deserve to be blind? Is it something he did? Is it something his parents did? This tension is expressed in an episode of the movie *Ray*, performed by the award-winning actor Jamie Foxx. His wife, Bea, played by Kerry Washington, pleads to him one day: *“The only thing that can help you is God, Ray!”* But Ray quickly turns on her: *“Don’t you talk about God! You have no idea how it feels to go blind and still be afraid of the*

dark. And every day, you stand and pray just for a little light, and you don't get anything. Cause God doesn't listen to people like me."

This particular tension is not new to us. In fact, the disciples of Jesus expressed the same misconception about sin common in their time. Physical blindness is a condition nobody wants to experience. The negative assumptions about blindness no doubt made it difficult to deal with life. Think of all the adverse expressions in which physical blindness is equated with: lack of recognition, understanding, and perception. Color blind. Blind as a bat. Rob someone blind. Blind date. Blind spot. So here is the man born blind, dealing with those negative assumptions, and adding to that the fact that blindness or any kind of disability in those days is equated with being sinful. Thanks to that verse in Exodus (20:5) that says: "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation." The disciples knew this from the heart. They grew up with this socio-cultural-religious belief. Was this man born blind because of his sins or his parents' iniquities?

We are not far behind in our understanding of sin with the first century people. When someone is ill with a death-threatening disease, someone might say this was no doubt a consequence of sin somewhere in the family. What about those who claim that children born with disabilities are only born that way because the parents or their immediate family have displeased God? What about those who were struck by those deadly earthquakes in Turkey and Syria or those in AIDS-stricken countries labelled as places where God's anger is at hand? It is encouraging to hear Jesus reminding us that there is no causal link between disability or illness with sin or how we perceive God. Things happen that way because of our human condition and the flawed universe we live in.

Irony in the gospel of John is an important ploy in his storytelling. People see, but they don't really see. They hear but they don't really listen. Take, for example, the intellectual Nicodemus, who initially appears to know who Jesus is. But in reality, he proves incapable of understanding what Jesus says. Similarly, the man born blind initially appeared to be the sinner, since his blindness seemed to be punishment for sin. But according to John's Jesus, sin is manifested in the blindness of unbelief, not in a lack of physical eyesight. The blind man's troubles began

when his sight was restored. How could he have anticipated that his healing by Jesus would set off such a string of unintended consequences to deal with? He can see everyone and everything around him, but no one recognizes him. All the support systems he expected to be there for him failed him. His identity was questioned by his baffled neighbours, who only recognized him when he was blind. His parents would not take the risk of truth-telling because they didn't want to be driven out of the synagogue. His parents put their own safety first before his welfare - they left him to fight his own battle. He is pestered by the Pharisees not once, but twice. The Pharisees did not believe his story because it opposed the story they wanted to tell. They want to portray Jesus as a sinner not a hero. They want another explanation, one that leaves them in control of all the religious goods and services. Finally, when he stands up to the religious leaders, they drove him out of the synagogue. He was driven out of his community as punishment for his witness testimony, and when Jesus heard about this, he sought out the man and welcomed him as one of the many unknown disciples who were spreading the Good News. His family, his faith community, his neighbours all failed to see him except for this man –Jesus of Nazareth, who remains by his side.

I know someone who is legally blind by medical standards. Unlike the man who had been blind since birth, she acquired her blindness due to glaucoma in her mid-forties. She knew the beauty of light before darkness enveloped her eyes. She knew what it would be like to see the flowers and trees, the beautiful sunset and the faces of her family and friends. She knew how delightful it was to have driven a car – to travel to places without asking the help of others. All those wonderful experiences faded when her eyesight failed. Despite repeated medical interventions, she was not cured. I sensed mixed emotions from her every time I asked her how she copes with her everyday life. Anger, frustration, anxiety, perhaps even grief. But despite her physical blindness, her faith is so strong that it helps her in her everyday life. She is one I would call physically blind but spiritually seeing. I'm sure you know someone like her.

“Do you think we are blind?” This reaction of the Pharisees demonstrates how often our eyes travel over someone familiar, not really seeing them, even though we see them all the time. We can learn a lot from this outspoken formerly blind man who refused to fold up when his faith

was challenged. His acceptance of Jesus' healing brought him not only the gift of physical sight but also that of spiritual vision, which enabled him to profess his faith. He calls Jesus a prophet. He moved from darkness to light while those who have sight, like the Pharisees, wilfully chose the darkness over the gift of light.

John Newton in the eighteenth century quoted the blind man when he wrote the all-time favourite hymn "Amazing Grace", as an autobiographical reflection on his conversion from being a slave trader. Rev. Alyce Mackenzie tells a story of a woman blind from birth who was asked by a friend, "How do you sing 'Amazing Grace'? The blind woman answered, "When we got to that first verse, I straightened my shoulders, and sang with gusto: 'Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. I was blind, and I still can't see! But . . . praise God from whom all blessings flow!" And Mackenzie concludes: "We need to take care in our prayers, preaching, teaching, and living so that we don't equate physical blindness with lack of spiritual discernment. A person can be physically blind and have 20/20 spiritual vision. And a person can have perfect 20/20 physical vision and be spiritually unable to discern a thing."

So here's my question for you. Which character in my sermon do you feel connected to? The blind man? Ray Charles? The woman who lost her eyesight? The woman born blind? The Pharisees? Jesus? The crowd? The parents? Now, close your eyes for a moment. What do you see? How do you feel? What do you hear? Can you see with your heart? And while your eyes are closed, listen to these words by Harvard professor Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza:

“Lacking what they want to see
makes my eyes hungry
and my eyes can feel only pain.
Once I lived behind thick walls of glass
and my eyes belonged
to a different ethic
timidly rubbing the edges
of whatever turned them on.
Seeing usually
was a matter of what was
in front of my eyes
matching what was

behind my brain.
Now my eyes have become
a part of me - exposed
quick, risky and open
to all the same dangers.
I see much
better now
and my eyes hurt.”

Please open your eyes.

Friends, once we have seen with our hearts, once we receive the mud paste that covers our eyes and acknowledge our limitations, we can't go back to the same world. We will see people differently. We will talk about issues differently. Our lives will turn upside down. And that, my friends, is good news! Amen.

Sources:

BCUC Lectionary Group

Carl Gregg, “Ray Charles and John 9: Seeing for the First Time”. patheos.org

Poem by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (Source: rexahunt.org)

Alyce Mackenzie commentary in patheos.org