

## **Believing is seeing.**

*A sermon preached at Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent. Yr. A. March 2, 2008. (Text: John 9:1-41)*

Think about what it feels like to be in the dark... in a completely dark place. Have you ever been in a cave, underground, or in a windowless basement when the lights went out? People step on each other, push each other down, and poke their fingers in one another's eyes. And if it's not totally dark, but nearly so, we still get confused about what we're seeing. Shapes are hard to make out. An overcoat on a peg looks like a person. Color is impossible to discern. Everything is some shade of gray. Smiles and frowns alike are indistinguishable. Forget about reading anything. Our depth perception is thrown off, and we can't tell how steep a flight of steps may be. Dim light is only a slight improvement over darkness.

Jesus said, "*As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*"

In the story of Jesus healing a man born blind we have the fascinating description of a situation where an assortment of people "see" the same person, but their perceptions of him are all different. Everybody in the story – except for Jesus – sees the blind beggar as a one-dimensional man.

Jesus' own disciples look at the blind beggar and they see him simply as living proof of someone's sin. Either he sinned or his parents sinned. There's no compassion for him. The poor man is merely fodder for a theological debate. — If nobody sinned, why would he be blind? Misfortune in this life, they think, has to be the result of *somebody's* sin. So the interesting question is: whose sin was it?

People in the neighborhood who are accustomed to seeing the blind man daily on the street only see "a beggar." Seeing him is the same as seeing "a tree" or "a vegetable stall." He's part of the local scenery, scarcely even human. They don't really know him, even though some of them walk past him every day and have even tossed a coin onto his blanket a few times. They've just treated him the way they'd have treated any other object that was blocking their path – as merely an obstacle, a "thing." So, when Jesus has given him sight and he is able to move around freely, they aren't sure who he is. The man has been defined exclusively by the role he has played in relationship to *them*. That is: he has been a blind beggar, immobile in the road, and they have been – at best – at least potentially, donors.

The Pharisees see the blind man in two ways: as a problem to be dealt with and as an ignorant, sinful person beneath their contempt. He has obviously been Jesus' partner in violating God's commandment concerning the Sabbath and, therefore – as far as they're concerned – when the beggar refuses to parrot their judgment on Jesus, he and Jesus are both to be condemned as law-breakers, outside the pale – people with whom "good, law-abiding people" such as they are must refuse to have fellowship.

His parents, from whom the man might have expected some compassion, who should have been filled with gratitude that their son has received his sight, instead see him only as a kind of threat to their own status. He's in trouble with the Pharisees; and they're afraid that somehow *they* might be implicated in his problems. If anyone is going to be expelled from the synagogue, they don't want it to be them.

Finally, there is the perspective of Jesus. He sees the blind beggar quite differently from the way his disciples or the bystanders or the Pharisees do. He sees him as full of wonderful potential. He says that the man's blindness is simply a dimension of his existence which will allow the work of God to be done, the glory of God to be revealed in him. And he proceeds to deal with the man in a way that finally releases the man's potential.

Jesus demonstrates to anyone who "has eyes to see" (that is, to *us*!) that the true "work of God" is not hair-splitting about what's legal or deciding about who are the "sinners" according to this or that Biblical precept, but rather about being *agents of new creation*. And that's the symbolism behind his spitting and making mud from the dust of the earth to put on the blind man's eyes. Remember the Genesis creation story? God forms Adam from the earth. Jesus uses a mud-pack to give the blind man sight, and the man becomes a new creation.

This raises for us the question of how *we* see other people and their situations and how we respond to them. To what extent are we “in the light” and to what extent are we “in the dark”? To what extent are we able to be agents of God’s new creation? —How quickly and glibly we take one look at them and pronounce a hasty judgment on other people! For example...

- We might see a Latino shoveling snow at a big house here in the West End this morning and say to ourselves, “Oh, there’s another illegal alien. We need to do something about ‘those people.’ They’re everywhere.” If we really knew the man who’s shoveling snow as a *person*, we’d know that his parents came from Mexico in the ‘60s and live in Alamosa, where he born and raised. The man has lived in Colorado all his life. His children go to kindergarten with some of our grandchildren.
- We might hear about a friend who has lost a lot of money because he invested heavily in a company that just went bankrupt, and we say to our spouse “It serves him right. He didn’t do careful research, and he didn’t even take the time to ask *my* opinion. I know about companies in that field, and I would have steered him away from that one.” Of course, if we had talked at length with the man, we’d have learned that his brother is president of the company into which he sank all his money, and he felt obligated out of love for his brother to take a big risk — which later proved unfortunate in a financial sense, because the company ultimately went under. But in another sense his risky investment was brilliant, because it forged a bond with his brother that will endure for a lifetime.
- We might hear about a couple who are divorcing and say immediately, “I’ve seen him in Starbucks with another woman. He has probably been cheating on his wife, and she got wise to it.” If we knew the truth, we’d have known that the couple had been undergoing marriage counseling for more than two years – trying hard to keep their relationship together. And the woman we saw in the coffee shop with him was their therapist.

Don’t *you* grow weary of the labels that we hang on people? I do. Once we’ve labeled someone, we’ve put them in a box and we don’t have to think about them anymore. We don’t have to listen to them. We don’t really have to *know* them. They’ve stopped being three-dimensional, multi-faceted, richly interesting individuals and have become pigeon-holed. We do it with partisan labels like “conservative” and “liberal” in politics or “traditionalist” and “revisionist” in the church.

The last verses of today’s gospel are the spiritual heart of the story of Jesus healing the man who was born blind. I want to read them to you:

After the healed blind man said, “Lord, I believe,” and worshiped 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 nearby heard this and they said to him, “Surely, we are not blind are we?”

And Jesus replied, “*If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.*”

The message here is clear: *Believing is seeing.*

When we walk in the light of Christ, when we live in a world illuminated by the One who is the light of the world, then we have *insight* and the capacity to perceive a level of reality that is more than merely superficial. We are in a position to be God’s agents of new creation.

There’s an old English proverb that goes back to the mid-sixteenth century: *None are as blind as those who will not see.*

The question for us to ponder is this: By what light are we making *our* way in the world?