

Sermon on the Man Born Blind, Lent 4, March 19, 2023

I've never been blind. I don't know what it's like. I've worn glasses since I was 8 years old, but even though things are pretty fuzzy without my glasses, I can still see colour and shape and movement. I think most of us are the same.

Imagine what it would be like to be blind, to have always been blind. Close your eyes. What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you feel? If you had never had sight, could you tell what sort of building you were in? Could I describe the stained glass windows to you, the coloured light? Would you understand? Keep your eyes closed.

The man in the story was born blind. He had never seen anything. He was able to get around quite well. He knew where the Pool of Siloam was and how to get there. Charles had a friend, Patrick, who was blind and he was driving him somewhere. Patrick said, "You've missed the turn." He was right. He knew exactly where he was. He did pretty well without eyesight. But he couldn't see anything.

So this man meets Jesus and Jesus gives him the gift of sight. OK, you can open your eyes. So much to see! Colour! Shape! Movement! I think this would be kind of overwhelming for this man. In fact, his brain probably couldn't interpret it at first. You know our eyes see slightly different things because they're a few inches apart. Our brain takes those two images and interprets them to add depth to things we see. Oh, and the images are upside down. Your brain figures that out too. We learn to do that as babies. This man would have had to learn as an adult.

I bet if he just used his eyesight he wouldn't have known how to get around. If he got lost, he probably closed his eyes to reorient himself. Ah, the sounds and smell of the carpenter shop. And coming down this street, the smell of a bakery is wafting and there's a hole in the pavement. Now I know where I am! Charles told me some people who have sight given to them medically after being blind all their lives can't adapt and they stay in their houses with the lights off where they feel much more secure. They refuse the vision.

We can tell this man won't do that: he's too sassy. But it will still cost him. Not only will he need to learn how to interpret what he sees, but he'll need a new job. He can't beg anymore if he's not blind. He'll need to learn how to do a job. Talk about no job skills. He'll be giving up the life he knew and learning a whole new set of things. Oh, and he got kicked out of the synagogue, too. And his parents might be a bit estranged from him. This new sight has cost him some. You can tell he thinks it's worth it. But it still costs.

So, of course, this story is about more than healing a blind man. It's also about healing our spiritual blindness. Jesus offers us sight, a new vision of life. He tells us about God's kingdom, God's dream for the earth. He tells us how to get there, too: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and love your neighbour as yourself. Really love your neighbour as yourself. Really love your neighbour.

Yeah, that neighbour. The pain in the neck neighbour. In fact, love your enemy, too. Because God does. God sees you as precious in his eyes, a wonder of his creation. He adores

you. That's hard for some of us to accept. He also adores your enemy and all your neighbours and, in fact, every other person on the planet. Even the bad ones. Also hard to get our heads around. God's vision of the world is as hard for us to understand as it is for a blind person to understand colours. It's that radically different.

The Pharisees in this story had a dilemma. If they accepted that Jesus was the Messiah, that God was working through him, they would have to abandon the principles by which they had lived. They believed that if only they could follow all the rules perfectly, the rules in the Law of Moses, then God would love them and bless Israel and save her. That's why they were so down on breaking the Sabbath. The rules were clear: no making mud or doing healing or any other work on the Sabbath. Jesus broke that rule. So therefore he must be a sinner. But he opened the eyes of the blind, so therefore God must be working through him. If they accept this, they have to accept that God works through people who break the rules. Wowza!

And their whole world, everything they've believed and worked for all their lives, goes up in smoke. It would be terribly disorienting. They would be lost. They wouldn't know how to behave. Their whole world would be turned over and they would be lost and they would lose their respected position in the world. But still, there's this blind guy who can now see, and how to explain it? Some of them really see that and start to think about Jesus with a more open mind. But others can't stand it, can't stand the confusion and they opt for what they've always known to be true and ignore the inconvenient fact that this guy can now see because a so-called sinner broke the Sabbath and healed him. To help them ignore it, they kick him out of the synagogue, so they won't have to see him.

If we accepted God's view of the world, if we allowed our eyes to be opened so we could see things as God sees them, see the absolute loveability of every human being, see the presence of God in every blade of grass and drop of water, see the preciousness of all creation, what would we have to give up? What cherished ideas would we have to abandon? How would our world be turned upside down? How would our lives change?

Jesus offers us a whole new vision of the way the world could be, one where people live together in love and help each other and stop spending trillions of dollars on bombs and guns. A world where people care for the earth which cares for them. A way of being where people see everything as sacred, because God is present in it. A way of living that isn't satisfied with having enough ourselves if our neighbours, all our neighbours around the world, don't. And once you've caught the vision of that world, the world God dreams of, you can't quite forget it, try as you might. And we do try sometimes.

I know that some people think I am a romantic idealist, that dreaming dreams that the world will someday be as God would like it to be, is a wholly unrealistic idea and that we can't live that way. And it is difficult to keep up hope in times like these. Especially if we've been disappointed in the past. As we all have. But I've been reading Archbishop Michael Curry's book, *Love is the Way*. He's the presiding bishop of the American Episcopal Church. He preached at Harry and Megan's wedding. He talks about having dreams, sharing God's dream. And he says, and I agree, that dreaming of things being different and working

lovingly for those dreams is not only effective, but also the only thing that has ever changed the world.

He gives several examples in his book: Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and lots of stories from his own life. He says we need to have a dream of how things could be better and we need to work for it, and we need to avoid the temptation to use the methods of the world to achieve those dreams. We need to use love, he says, the only thing that ever truly changes things. Really changes them. And we need some faith and some hope and some help from God. And it's going to cost us. And it's going to be hard work. And it's not going to happen overnight.

Our change of vision doesn't happen overnight either. You've all seen the stained glass windows at night. You can't tell what the image is. It's just dark glass and irregular shapes. But as the light grows outside, you can start to see some colour, the shapes start to make sense. But you don't get the full picture till the sun shines on them. You also don't get to see the full glory of a human soul until you see it in the sunshine of God's love.

Here's an example maybe we can relate to. Back in the 20s a group of women started working for women's rights. They thought women should be legally considered persons. They thought women should be able to hold political office and vote, and hold jobs and get an education and other radical ideas like that. This is in the lifetime of some of you here. When my mother-in-law was born in 1925, she would not have been able to do those things. She was not legally a person, and centuries of habit reinforced that. It was just the way things had always been. Unthinkable to try to change it. But they did try and you all know the rest of the story.

When my parents-in-law were married in 1948, they both assumed that his role was to be a priest and do ministry and make a living and her role was to support him and run the household and raise the kids. They didn't question that, at first. But 30 years later when their sons got married, none of them lived that way and they never even considered living that way. In one generation, building on the work of the one before, those things had changed. You've all been through that particular change in society. You know how odd it seemed. Those things changed, in spite of centuries of patriarchal thinking and habits, because some people had a dream and pursued it.

If we let Jesus open our eyes and see the world the way he sees it, and we start to value what God values, love, that's going to cost us, too. It's going to disrupt our whole world. We will be seriously disoriented, like the blind man who was now able to see. It'll take a while before we can find our way. It will take patience, and perseverance, and hope and faith. And companions on the journey. If we accept God's vision, we're going to start seeing everything differently. We'll start loving what we were never able to love before. And that new vision will change everything.

Here's the question: Do we have the courage to go wash the mud off and open our eyes and see things differently, the way God sees them? Do we have the courage to disrupt

our lives by changing how we understand things? Do we have the courage to follow God's dream and truly live by love? It will cost us if we do, but I doubt if we'll regret it.