

WGUMC March 30, 201 "Surely We Are Not Blind, Are We?"
John 9:1-41

It started suddenly when I turned 40. I think it was all that screen time when I was writing the dissertation. One day, I had been reading the newspaper in the morning, but after a long day of work, couldn't read that same paper in the evening. My siblings had all been four-eyes since their teens and early twenties. I was the lone proud two-eyed one. And now I needed glasses.

Since that time, it seems as if my eyes have been going downhill fast. I go for a new prescription every couple of years or so. I asked the ophthalmologist, "Am I going blind?" He said, "No. Your eyes will keep getting gradually worse until you're about 60 and then they'll plateau." I guess I have something to look forward to.

I have come to accept that I'm getting older. I hope I'm also getting wiser. I'm willing to lose some eyesight as long as I gain some insight. There has to be a blessing in this blindness.

Let's talk for a moment about blindness. We use that metaphor a lot in the church, without much sensitivity to those who have physical conditions that make it difficult or impossible for them to see. As David can tell us, the church throughout its history has not been a very welcoming place for people with disabilities.

Take the Methodist Church. Charles Wesley wrote our signature hymn. And one of the verses goes like this: "Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb, your loosened tongues employ; ye blind, behold your Savior come, and leap, ye lame, for joy." And then there's the all-time favorite, Amazing Grace: "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."

What the church has a bad habit of doing is using the language of physical disability as a stand-in for spiritual infirmity. But don't just blame the church. You have to blame the Bible, too.

In John's Gospel we read the story of the healing of the man born blind. But we all know that this story is not about the physical condition of the man, but the spiritual condition of those who refused to accept the man's healing and, more importantly, the one who healed him. These folks were unaware, unenlightened, and unfeeling. And so the Bible uses the convenient metaphor of blindness to describe people who are oblivious to the obvious.

This is not a physical but a spiritual disease and it touches everyone in this story, except the blind man and Jesus. First we have the neighbors who "had seen him before as a beggar." But when he was healed, they couldn't identify him. "Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.'" They didn't recognize him, even though they had walked by him every day, because they had never seen him as a real person nor had they regarded him as worthy of their attention.

We know about that one, don't we? The homeless man on the street has no identity. And we do most anything to avoid looking into his eyes for fear that we might see some hint of his humanity. And then would come those unwanted feelings of responsibility. Yes, we know the neighbors in this story by name. Ours.

But they aren't the only ones who are acting oblivious. We also have the Pharisees. While the neighbors couldn't agree on the *man's* identity, the Pharisees were more interested in *Jesus's* identity. Because Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath, "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."

But the fact that Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath is really a side issue. The real problem is that the Powers That Be don't want to recognize any good deed unless it's done by

someone in their own party. In this case we'll call it the Moses Party.

You could say that Congress today is just repeating history. We have politicians who oppose on principle any good idea coming from across the aisle. In fact, many would rather work for the demise of the other party than for the good of their country. It's a political game.

So, they say, let's dig up a scandal. Let's hold a hearing. Let's launch an investigation. That's exactly what the Pharisees were doing. Because they couldn't decide whether Jesus was a sinner or sent from God, they subpoenaed the man's parents for questioning.

Here we come to our third set of folks who are oblivious. The man's parents plead the Fifth when the Pharisees asked about Jesus. They would only say, "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."

Obviously, the parents were afraid of the Pharisees, and they didn't want to risk getting blacklisted for being members of the Jesus party. So they figured that their best defense was to give no offense.

Churches today are full of pastors and people who don't want to give any offense. They are afraid to tell anyone what God is doing in their own lives or in the world around them for fear...of what? making someone think? giving someone hope?

I know. When we think about telling others about Jesus we immediately think about obnoxious street corner preachers. But really, don't let Fred Phelps and his family ruin it for everybody. Did you hear that the founder of Westboro Baptist Church has died? After traveling around the country for decades, preaching hate and judgment, the man finally meets his Judge. I pray that he finds love and mercy. And I do hope that his soul finds rest. I know that now that he's gone, ours will.

The man in our Gospel story this morning gives us a much better model for witnessing. First remember that when the man was interrogated by his neighbors and by the Pharisees, he hadn't even seen Jesus yet. Jesus put mud on his eyes and sent him away to wash. When he could see, Jesus was nowhere to be seen.

Those of us who think we know Jesus can learn from this. We haven't seen the full picture yet. Our personal experience isn't everyone's experience. Paul says, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." [I Cor 13:12]

The man who had been born blind, once he was healed, didn't claim to be able to see more than he could see. Unlike the Pharisees, he didn't go around telling other people what they should think or what they should believe. He didn't engage in their theological debates about Jesus. He simply told his

story, "I do not know whether [Jesus] is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

My problem with Fred Phelps is that by telling people that they were going to burn in hell, he claimed to know things that only God can know. He claimed to be able to see things that no human being is allowed to see. And at the same time, he was oblivious to the central truth of Christianity: in Jesus Christ God offers us the most amazing love and mercy.

That's what the man's neighbors were too preoccupied to see, the Pharisees were too arrogant to see, and his parents were too frightened to see. Though they all could see Jesus, they couldn't see him as the incarnation of God's love and mercy. But because of the man's humility, he could see, and for that, they drove him out of the city.

At the end of our story, Jesus went searching for the man he healed. And he asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" And the man said, "Tell me [who he is], so that I may

believe in him." And Jesus said, "You have seen him, and the one who is speaking with you is he." And the man said, "Lord, I believe."

As they say, seeing is believing. But the man first saw Jesus with the eyes of faith, and only after that with the eyes on his face. It was his insight, not his eyesight that enabled him to believe. And that, my friends, you can't get from the ophthalmologist. It's a gift that comes from the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray.

All-seeing God,
Our eyes cannot see you, but our hearts want to know you. Our eyes cannot see the sign in the distance or the fine print on the page but, by your grace, our faith can see all the truth that we need if we would only receive.

We are sorry to say that we too readily see the failings of others without seeing the faults in ourselves, so send your Spirit to correct our vision and drive us to our knees in confession.

While we are there, we admit that we have steadfastly refused to see the humanity of those who belong to the other party, so send your Spirit to teach us how to love our enemy, for they, too, are members of your family.

And we too often don't want to see the need of our neighbor or the poverty of a stranger, but our hearts know that they are there. Show us, Lord, how to care.

And finally, while we pray for better eyesight, give us better insight so that we may see you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.