3-25/26-17 Rev. Amy Haines

John 9:1-41 Love That Lights the Way Dare You to Love Series

In three generations of my immediate family, only my youngest sister has never worn glasses.

I can still remember my amazement on that first day of 6th grade when I could clearly see the blackboard from the front and the back of the classroom. In the summer between 5th and 6th grade I received my first pair of glasses, and it was like a new world had opened up around me.

When Ken and I were dating, he struggled to understand my limited sight. I can read a book without my glasses on, but I cannot clearly see the alarm clock beside the bed. If I took off my glasses for the rest of this sermon you would each turn into blobs of color and my notes would look like squiggles on the page.

Having worn glasses for so long, I admit that there are days when I take even my limited sense of sight for granted. Consider the times when you see, but not really see, the world around you.

In my family this most often occurs when we are lost of the world of digital technology or lost in the wonder of a good book.

Trust me for a moment and close your eyes—Can you tell me what color the altar cloth is today? Can you tell me what color is primary in the flower arrangement? Can you describe what the person sitting two rows in front of you is wearing, and more importantly can you name them? OK, please open your eyes.

Have you ever been in a cavern when they turn out the lights and it is so dark you literally cannot see your hand in front of your face? Or have you ever woken up in the middle of the night at your home and become disoriented walking around in the darkness?

Imagine being blind from birth. Your sense of sight is nonexistent. You learn the world around you be using your other senses—turning your ear to a voice speaking to you, smelling your lunch, learning by touch and by counting steps to navigate around obstacles even in a familiar room. Words that other people use to describe the world around them have no meaning for you. What is yellow? What is sunshine? What does a smile look like?

..For 51 years Bob Edens was blind. Born blind, his world was a black hall of sounds and smells.

He felt his way through five decades of darkness. And then, a skilled surgeon performed a complicated operation and, for the first time, Bob Edens had sight. At last he could see.

And he found it overwhelming.

"I never would have dreamed that yellow is so...yellow," he exclaimed. "I don't have the words. I am amazed by yellow. But red is my favorite color. I just can't believe red. I can see the shape of the moon—and I like nothing better than seeing a jet plane flying across the sky leaving a vapor trail. And of course, sunrises and sunsets. And at night I look at the stars in the sky and the flashing light. You could never know how wonderful everything is."

 --Max Lucado, God Came Near, Multnomah Press, 1987, p. 13.

Sermonillustrations.com: blindness, adapted

While the doctors chose modern medicine to heal Bob Edens, one day Jesus chose the power of God to heal a man blind from birth sitting by the edge of the road near Jerusalem. Jesus dared to love this man known in his community as an outcast because of his blindness.

Jesus’ disciples asked a questionthat echoed the common understanding of the time. “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” In first century Israel, physical impairments were thought to be evidence of sin and prosperity was thought to be a sign of God’s approval. So for the man to have been born blind was either punishment for his parents’ sin or punishment for something he had done wrong in utero.

Yet Jesus replied, “neither sinned.” He does not place blame on this man or his parents, refusing to connect his blindness with sin. Instead, Jesus looks at the man and sees an opportunity for God’s work to be revealed in and through his healing.

In John 9:5, Jesus states to his disciples: “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

This echoes his declaration to the religious leaders in John 8:12: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

What Jesus declares in word, he now displays in action. As he moves the blind man from physical darkness to the light of sight, Jesus also offers spiritual healing to all who will listen, believe and follow him.

Notice that unlike other stories of healing in the Gospels, this blind man did not seek Jesus out; rather, Jesus chose him for healing. And Jesus dared to love him on the Sabbath. Violating Sabbath restrictions, Jesus mixed his saliva with the dirt of the ground then smeared the mud on the man’s eyes. Jesus then ordered him to go wash in the pool of Siloam.

The man dared to trust Jesus. He went to the pool of Siloam, washed his eyes, then returned to his community—healed and able to see.

This man was healed! He, who had been blind from birth! What a reason to celebrate!

Instead of celebration, however, his return was met with confusion, doubt, fear and resistance to the truth. Although his sight had been restored, no one celebrated his journey to wholeness and few welcomed him into their social and religious community.

First his neighbors doubted that it was really him. Although they had known him for all of his life, now that he could see, they didn’t recognize him. They kept denying that such a life transformation was possible.

Then the religious leaders kept asking him to tell his story over and over, for it made no logical sense. Healed from the blindness he had dealt with since birth? Can’t happen. The healer is a radical rabbi from Galilee? No sinner could make this occur. And the healing took place on the Sabbath? That’s against all of God’s rules!

The religious leaders were so convinced that they knew God’s truth that they denied the truth of Jesus’ power standing right in front of them. They refused to admit that God’s truth may be much bigger than what they know or see or believe.

Even the blind man’s parents distanced themselves from his healing. While they confirmed for the religious leaders that their son had been born blind, they refused to admit that Jesus was the one to heal their son. They were fearful that any association with the followers of Jesus would get them expelled from their community.

The blind man was healed—yet no one celebrated his journey from darkness to light.

Lest we be too hard on his community--how reluctant are we still today to see the divine hand in the healings of those around us? We live in a technical society. We live in a skeptical society.

We attribute miracles to modern medicine. We scoff at personal encounters with Christ that can only be called divine healing.

Like the blind man’s neighbors, we do not like to shake up the status quo. When someone is healed or changed, how hard of a time do we have accepting the new Joe or Jane? We keep thinking back to when they were blind, when they were a wild child, when they were selfish.

We keep trying to pigeon hole them in the past, not trusting the person we see before us today, healed and whole and transformed by the grace of God.

My senior year in college, I received a visit from a student named Rob from the Methodist Theological School in Ohio. On the surface this visit was not out of the ordinary because I was looking at seminaries, and Rob was trying to convince me to attend there. What was unusual was that Rob had only graduated from college a couple of years ahead of me, and since we have both attended Muskingum, I could still remember Rob as the frat boy he once was. I, like the neighbors in the time of Jesus, had trouble seeing Rob for who God had created and called him to be rather than the Rob of the past.

Are we open to Jesus’ love lighting our way from darkness to light, from denial to truth, from despair to hope, from the past to the present?

.. Australian preacher Bruce Prewer once said:

"Some people have excellent eyesight but do not see further than their noses. Some have good vision yet choose to see only a little of the way, the truth and the life. And some have no physical sight yet who see brilliantly along the path of Christ."

 -- Richard Fairchild "None So Blind.... (As They Will Not See)"

spirit-net.ca/sermons 2005

Jesus offers spiritual healing to all who will listen, believe and follow him. In what ways are we still blind to the love of Jesus? In what ways are we still blind to the call of Jesus?

Where do we find ourselves today on the continuum of spiritual blindness to spiritual sight? Like the religious leaders, do we still refuse to open our eyes to the truth of Jesus? Like the neighbors, do we see truth, yet refuse to believe what we see? Or can we echo the words of the man blind from birth when he falls down in worship and says, “Lord, I believe”?

While this Gospel story celebrates Jesus healing a blind man, it also points to Jesus’ willingness to go to great lengths to heal us of our spiritual blindness.

Not once, but twice, Jesus sought out this man. First, Jesus chose him to be physically healed.

Second, Jesus searched for him to heal him spiritually, inviting him to claim his identity as a follower of Jesus. When others ignored him, Jesus offered grace. When others attacked him, Jesus gave him confidence. When others rejected him, Jesus led him to a new way of living.

..There is a story of a beggar who was sitting across the street from an artist's studio. The artist saw him and thought he would make an interesting portrait study so from a distance he painted the defeated man whose shoulders drooped, and whose eyes were downcast and sad. When he was finished, he took the portrait over to the beggar so he could look at it.

 "Who is that?" the beggar questioned.

The painting bore a slight resemblance to himself, but in the painting before him he saw a person of dignity, with squared shoulders and bright uplifted eyes, almost handsome!

He asked the artist, "Is that me? I don't look like that."

But the artist replied, "That is the person I see in you."

 --Brett Blair, www.eSermons.com

Adapted from New Vision in Christ, by Rev. Michael J. Fish

Jesus saw others the way God sees us—as beloved sons and daughters, as men and women with a future, as those who are loved and welcomed rather than ridiculed and rejected.

Jesus sought and still seeks today to move us all along the path from darkness to light, and from skeptic to disciple.

The man born blind moved from describing Jesus as the man who healed him to describing him as a prophet to describing him as a miracle worker from God to worshiping him as the Son of Man.

The first time the man born blind is questioned concerning his healing he simply tells the facts of his experience. The second time he is questioned he shares a shortened version of his experience. The third time he is questioned, his story is shortened to “I was blind and now I see.” But in this third re-telling of his experience, the healed blind man goes beyond simply stating the facts. Having grown in his faith, the healed man now begins to witness to Jesus, questioning and challenging the religious authorities over their spiritual blindness.

The story of John Newton is a story from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight.

John was born in 1740 in England. He grew up in the Anglican Church. He went to church as a boy and learned his Bible verses.

Then his mother died when he was only eleven years old, and so he traveled with his father who was a ship captain. His father’s cargo was black slaves and he would have two to three hundred slaves down below in the ship hole, lying next to each other. The father himself was not a slave trader but a boat owner who shipped the cargo of black slaves.

In a storm, young John Newton was washed overboard and was picked up on the open seas by a slave trader. Now John Newton no longer had mother or father. So he began to learn to become a slave trader like the man who rescued him.

One day, years later, John Newton was up in his cabin, reading the Bible and an old devotional classic by the name of IMITATION OF CHRIST, by Thomas a Kempis, when a miracle began to occur. The Holy Spirit got inside of John and he was converted. Jesus the healer got inside of him and healed his spiritual blindness. John realized on that day that personally he was wrong and culturally his society was wrong. On that day he began to see the evils of the slave trade and his complicity in such an evil business.

In honor of the miracle that had occurred in his life, John Newton composed a song which is now one of American’s favorite hymns: “Amazing Grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

We, too, are called to grow in our journey with Jesus. At first we may only be able to see glimpses of the light of Christ in our lives. Then we begin to realize that Christ seeks to shine his light into the depths of our lives. Once we too can acknowledge “I was blind and now I see” then we are called to begin to shine the light of Christ to others, and to share our stories of moving from darkness to light.

At first Christ’s light and love in us may only be a glimmer, yet as we grow in faith that light and love shining through us will only get brighter. Yet no matter where we are along the journey of faith, we are called to shine his light, in everyday conversation or extraordinary action.

Jesus opened the eyes of the blind man. The blind man testified that “though I was blind, now I see.” Jesus opened the eyes of John Newton. John testified that “I once was lost but now am found.” Jesus yearns to open our eyes, to be in our hearts, to heal us of our spiritual blindness. What is our testimony of healing?

In response to Christ’s light,

May we dare to love others as Christ has loved us.

May we dare to share our stories of the healing presence of Christ in our lives.

May we dare to be places of welcome to those struggling and healed.

May we dare to light the way for others into the arms of Jesus.

May it be so.

Let us pray.