

March 26, 2017
Fourth Sunday in Lent
"I-C-U"

1 Samuel 16:1-13 ~ John 9:1-41

As a child, and for most of my adult life, I had perfect vision. I must admit that I took it for granted. But things do change over time, and when I got to that age where my arms weren't long enough to read the fine print I began my quest for glasses. I started with drugstore readers ... bumping my way up the magnification scale. When I could no longer "see the writing on the wall" at age 50 I humbled myself with a trip to the optometrist.

It turned out that I needed corrective lenses for both reading and distance so she suggested bifocals. I was a little surprised by that (aren't bifocals for old folks?), but I gave them a try, and got a pair of those no-line bifocals so that no one would be the wiser. They were so difficult to get used to ... when I walked around in them it seemed that my knees began somewhere near my shoulders. So I just quit wearing them and when I returned to the doctor I admitted that I apparently didn't possess the motor skills for bifocals. She told me not to worry because the next thing I should do is have my cataracts removed. Cataracts! Talk about adding insult to injury! How in the world did I get cataracts at my tender age, but sure enough there they were in both eyes.

After two simple procedures I had them removed, and was fitted with a new pair of glasses. Yes, another pair of no-line bifocals and with a little perseverance I managed to master them. Now the trouble seemed to be that I saw too clearly ... and that time had not been as kind to me as I had previously believed. Every day I could chart new spots and wrinkles on my face. I apparently traded my lips for those of my Aunt Cora and could now see that my lipstick migrated both north and south, as did hers. I discovered that I didn't look as young as I felt. It had obviously been a very long time since I had really seen myself.

Vision was the issue in our scripture today. We heard another extended story in John's gospel about an encounter with Jesus ... in this one, the story of a man born blind. Jesus gave him new eyes, but by the time the story is over, we are led to wonder who is really blind and who can see. We are led to ponder the relation between sight and insight. The tragedy turns out not to be a man who was born without sight and can't see, but those who are born with sight, but refuse to see. We learn that only Jesus ... and the one Jesus heals ... are actually able to see.

The tale begins like most Jesus stories. Jesus is walking along when he comes across this man. This poor fellow was born blind. He couldn't even imagine a sunset or the image of his friend's faces. Congenital blindness is a challenge for someone in our day ... so imagine what it was like in those days. Jesus, who could resist the temptation to turn stones to bread to feed his own hunger, could never resist the opportunity of compassion ... to heal a person in distress. So the first and most important detail of this story is that Jesus sees the blind man.

Stop right here and think about that for a moment. Most of the time, we don't see people. We don't look to see the person inside the people we encounter ... the emotion in their faces ... their body language ... the image they try to project ... the realities they can't hide. We don't even look carefully at our own families ... let alone the stranger at the gate. The homeless speak of feeling invisible, because so many people walk by without even glancing their way ... without

even acknowledging their existence with a "hello" ... without even seeing them. But Jesus saw them. And Jesus sees us.

And our story from the Hebrew Scriptures is the original Cinderella tale. It suggests that God sees us as we are ... not as we want to be seen ... not even as we see ourselves. Samuel looked at Jesse's sons and saw some fine manly specimens who looked exactly like what we might want to see in a King. But God looked at a spindly shepherd boy ... dirty from his days in the field and said ... there's your King! God is not impressed with fine clothes and a good haircut ... with nice makeup ... or with finely chiseled six pack abs. God sees who we are within. God sees what we do ... and what we don't. God sees what we might become. God sees us from the top of our head to the tip of our toes ... and from our sunburned skin to our life-burned heart. God always sees us, and God always loves us. And that's the way Jesus saw this man born blind. He saw a person. He saw the glory of God planted in a human soul. He saw the object of God's affection.

The disciples didn't see this man in the same way. They were academic, like a teaching physician doing rounds with students ... talking about the patient as if he were not there. They were analytical, like a committee formed to talk about helping people in need ... which is a world away from actually helping people in need. They were arrogant, like some televangelists ... using their beliefs to define the man ... instead of letting the man define their beliefs. And from their aloof spiritual perch, it's clear they didn't care one whit about the person they were discussing.

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The age old question ... whose fault is it? They presumed we should feel less compassion for those whose suffering results from their own choices. Much human suffering is the result of our own bad choices, but most is not. Jesus dismissed their intellectualizing of this man's pain. He just said, "Watch this! See what God's love is going to do." He spat in the dirt, rolled up two balls of mud, and just as God formed Adam from the dust of the ground, Jesus formed new sight for this man. And when the man was baptized ... when he washed off the mud in the pool of Siloam ... he could see. He could see!

Now we might expect that a spontaneous party would ensue ... everybody happy that this man has been healed ... a son of their own village ... given a new beginning ... flowers ... cards ... a fatted calf ... a chocolate cake. But no, look at the reaction of the man's neighbors. They won't believe it's really him. They won't see him as he is ... only as he was. They continue to see the old beggar. One of the reasons people don't change is that we won't let them. We won't let go of their past. We won't change ourselves to make room for them to change.

The man in our gospel today also has a system that needs healing. He told his neighbors his story, but they weren't ready to change everything ... they weren't ready to change anything ... they weren't ready to believe in Jesus, so they went to the clergy to get an explanation. Well, certainly the clergy will do better. All of us religious folk know that when someone is healed that the clergy will tell us to rejoice and praise God ... and to help that person adjust to a new life. Right? Sadly, no. The Pharisees didn't see this man either. They saw a breach in their rigid beliefs. They saw an anomaly in their spiritual system. They saw a threat to their power in the name of God. They saw their ideology at stake.

It's just amazing how what we see can be shaped by what we expect to see ... how we will deny seeing what we just don't want to see ... even when it's plain as the nose on our faces. I have to

admit, I have an inner Pharisee myself. She doesn't want me to see any good in those people who disagree with me and don't believe the same things that I believe. She doesn't want me to see people who have hurt me as authentic human beings who are also beloved of God. She doesn't want me to see people that I don't like as human. She tries to convince me that they are evil ... that they are enemies ... that they are crazy ... that they are somehow less than human. You know, belief is a good thing, but not when it's linked with arrogance. Arrogant belief ... no matter how you label it ... liberal or conservative, fundamentalist or progressive ... religious or patriotic ... dehumanizes others. Ideology can blind us, and blind ideology gives people permission to kill. When you don't see your enemies as human like yourself, it isn't so hard to put them out of your misery ... for God's sake or the sake of the nation or for the good of the people.

A student once asked a rabbi: "Master, when do we know the dawn is coming and night is past? Is it when we can tell a sheep from a goat in the pasture? Or when we can tell an oak from a cedar tree?" The Rabbi answered, "No, when you can look into the eyes of a stranger and see that he is your brother ... that she is your sister, then you will know a new day has dawned. Until that time comes, we are still in the night."

The Pharisees brought this guy in. "Just give us the facts!" "Well, this fellow put mud on my eyes. I washed it off. Then I could see." "Aha! He broke the Sabbath! You aren't supposed to make mud balls on the Sabbath. The Bible is clear about that! He broke the Sabbath, so he can't be from God, so you can't really be healed." Doesn't it seem that we're always telling God what God can and can't do and even how God can and can't do it? We must be so smart! But I remember another time, when Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath." I wonder if he wouldn't also have said, "The church was made for people, not people for the church." Or, "The Bible was written for people, not people for the Bible." What do you think? I just know that people were awfully important to Jesus ... more important it seems, than following somebody's interpretation of the rules or avoiding association with sinners or protecting the clergy's beliefs about God.

The Pharisees demanded: "What do you see in this healer?" "I don't know," the man said, "A prophet maybe?" Then they saw red. Here was a grown man, but they brought his mom and dad to testify. "Tell us the truth. Your son's crazy. He wasn't really born blind, was he? Or are you in this conspiracy, too?" I hate to think of those parents put on the spot. I've been there. For many years our daughter was in and out of a variety of adolescent psychiatric facilities, and that same inner Pharisee told me again and again that I was to blame. These parents did see their child ... like any good parent would ... like God sees all God's children, but they also saw the threat. They were blinded by fear. They said, "Well, uh, yeah, that's our son, and he was born blind, and it appears that he can see now, but it's not our fault." Funny, isn't it? First the disciples wanted to blame his parents that he was blind ... and now the Pharisees want to blame his parents that he can see.

The Pharisees pressed the man harder, trying to get him to recant ... making him tell and retell his story, trying to catch him in a lie. All these learned Pharisees argued with an untrained, uneducated beggar. It would seem that he didn't stand a chance ... except, he could speak to his truth. They knew so much. He knew only, "I once was blind, but now I see." For this, they had no answer. The argument went to the beggar. So they drove him out. This kind of testimony *infuriates ideologues who try to force people into their beliefs instead of trusting God ... seeing what God is doing with people.*

I promise you, there is a lot I don't know. My insight, like my sight, can be a little fuzzy at times. I do study the scripture, but I'm no expert, and there is much I don't understand. I don't know why we continue to struggle with things that should be as plain as the nose on *our* faces. I don't know why we are so fearful of those who do not look or act just as we do. I don't know why we are satisfied to live in a world that tolerates the unjust distribution of wealth and the power of corporations in our country, regardless of its effects on people or the environment. I don't know why issues of global prosperity take a back seat to homeland security. But I do know this. In my lifetime I have heard women preach the word of God as effectively as any man. I have seen gay, lesbian and transgendered persons filled with the Spirit of God bringing honor to Jesus' name. I have seen people of all races and faiths worship together as brothers and sisters, children of the one God.

There were people in my lifetime who wanted to tell me all this was impossible. I only know that once I was blind, but now I see. I have seen people overcome addiction. I have seen others surprisingly, if not miraculously, healed. I have seen people forgive someone who hurt them badly years before. I have seen victims offer pardon to perpetrators of violent crimes. I have seen people change and systems change by the grace of God. There are people who want to say none of this can happen. I only know that once I was blind, but now I see.

The story ends with Jesus and the man whose eyes he has opened seeing each other. The man has been given both sight and insight. He trusts in the one who opened his eyes. What happens when Jesus gives us eyes to see? It changes everything. Or, nothing changes, but we change, and that changes everything for us.

Jesus did his for a man born blind. Jesus saw him, and then he saw Jesus. But, tragically, the neighbors, the disciples, and especially the Pharisees still didn't recognize what God had done. They had eyes, but they refused to see. Consequently, they will soon find a way to have Jesus arrested. The Romans, blinded by their own power, will plait a wreath of thorns and thrust it upon his head. They will strip him, beat him, and nail him to the cross. They will place a sign over him that says, "Here is your King." They will intend this ironically, because, hanging on that cross, he doesn't look like a king that any sane person would follow. In greater irony yet, God will see all this and all of us and will say, yes, there is your King ... who brings a whole new vocabulary ... who gives everything and everyone a new name ... who brings the dawn of a new day!

May we pray?

Open our eyes, dear God, to see the stranger as our sister and our brother. Open our eyes to see your face in the faces of people around us. Open our eyes to see your hand at work in human lives and in the opportunities you give us to care for them. Give us sight and insight to recognize the grace we have received and rejoice in Jesus' name. Amen.