

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday in Lent
March 26, 2017

Receiving Sight

John 9:1-41

Do you see? Or are you blind?

Careful now!

Before you answer,

consider Jesus' words to the Pharisees in the last verse of this reading:

If you were blind, you would not have sin.

But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

So much of the Gospel of John uses the metaphor of seeing.

Light and sight are the way to know Jesus,

and his Father who sent him,

and to receive the abundant life Jesus came to give us.

And yet, in this story,

the *true light who enlightens everyone*

seems unable to penetrate the darkness

of this group of Jewish leaders,

but only seems to drive them further into the darkness.

In fact, at the end of the story,

Jesus explicitly states that this will be the result of his ministry:

I came into this world for judgment

so that those who do not see may see,

and those who do see may become blind.

So how are we to receive our sight?

What makes us more like the man who was born blind but now sees,

and less like the Pharisees in this story who grow increasingly more blind?

The story begins with a troubling theological problem, raised by the disciples,

and Jesus' answer to them, which is no less troubling:

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"
they ask.

Jesus answers, *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned;*

he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

The good thing here

is that Jesus does not connect this man's illness with some particular sin

of his or his parents.

To the familiar question, “What did I do to deserve this?”

Jesus gives a clear answer:

a person’s suffering is not necessarily linked to a sin committed.

But what Jesus does seem to say

does not help us feel much better about the cause of this man’s blindness;

in fact, it may make us feel worse,

in that it seems to put his blindness off on **God’s need to make a point.**

Would God really cause someone to be born blind,
and live with blindness all the way into adulthood,

and be reduced to begging in the street,

just as a “prop”

so that one day Jesus could make a point

to some belligerent Pharisees?

Really??

Now I’m all about giving glory to God,

but I’m not sure I want to glorify a God who would do that.

But, listen: this translation and interpretation — which has been accepted for years —
is probably the unfortunate result of decisions made in the 16th century
about where to put the verse divisions.

The original Greek did not have any verse divisions,
or even any punctuation marks, for that matter.

Verse divisions were added in the 1500’s

as the Bible was being translated into the various languages of the people.

Verses have been a wonderful help to us,

but sometimes they make a difference in how we understand the Bible,

and sometimes those 16th century scholars may have gotten it wrong.

In this story, the verse divisions are most unfortunate and have caused much difficulty.

So if we get rid of the verse divisions, and just look at the text itself,

a perfectly acceptable translation would be this:

Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned. [period]

He was born blind. [period]

In order that the works of God might be revealed in him,

we must work the works of him who sent me.”

You see the difference?

That the works of God might be revealed in him

is the reason given for why the disciples need to be busy with Jesus’ ministry.

It is not the reason the man was born blind!

Why was the man born blind?

Jesus does not give a reason.

He just states that the man was born blind.

**Because sometimes there just is not a discernible reason
why bad things happen.**

There is certainly the big picture reason: that the creation is broken.
And yes, part of that brokenness is human sin.
But to point to any person with a disability,
or to any tragic suffering,
and to say, “God made this happen to this person because...”
is most likely further than we ever ought to go, theologically.

*“Neither this man nor his parents sinned. [period]
He was born blind. [period]*

Now...

*In order that the works of God might be revealed in him,
we must work the works of him who sent me.”*

In other words, Enough with the theological blame game.
Let’s get on with the work of loving people and alleviating suffering
in the name of Jesus, the Son of God.

The group of Pharisees in this story do not get this point,
as the entire dialogue with them has to do with
figuring out who to blame for what.

What is it about this group of Jewish leaders —
and let’s be clear,
John refers to “the Pharisees” and “the Jews” somewhat loosely
to refer to this particular group of Jewish leaders that have it out for Jesus.

What is it that causes them to be so unable to have their eyes opened to Jesus?

There is a great book that came out about 5 years ago, by Social Scientist Jonathan Haidt,
entitled, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*.

Haidt makes the case,
through some really fascinating social science experiments,
that people make moral judgments, and discern right from wrong,
largely based on intuition — at the gut-level —
rather than through a rational process.
Intuition comes first, strategic reasoning second.

Haidt uses the metaphor of a rider on an elephant,
saying “the mind is divided, like a rider on an elephant,
and the rider’s job is to serve the elephant.”

The rider represents our rational thought processes,
and the elephant is our automatic, emotional processes.

These automatic, emotional processes have much more power in the human mind, because they have been driving the human species for about 500 million years, whereas the capacity for language-based reasoning only came along more recently in the history of homo sapiens.

The rider may be able to see further into the future than the elephant, and may direct the elephant somewhat to help it sidestep disasters, but more often than not

**the rider is just a spokesman
for why the elephant is going where it's going.**

So we feel first and think second.

We have a gut-level response first, and strategic reasoning second.

At least, this is the natural human tendency.¹

Another scientific discovery about the much celebrated human capacity for reason is that it may have developed more for the sake of winning arguments rather than simply for thinking straight.

The idea goes more or less like this:

Humans' biggest advantage over other species is our ability to cooperate.

Cooperation is difficult to establish and almost as difficult to sustain.

For any individual, freeloading is always the best course of action.

Reason developed not to enable us to solve abstract, logical problems or even to help us draw conclusions from factual data;

**rather, it developed to resolve the problems posed
by living in collaborative groups.**

That is to say,

we are not so much intellectual as we are interactional.

Our reason developed to help us with our group interactions,

and in large part to keep ourselves from being taken advantage of in our group.

In other words,

our rational minds developed

to win arguments and to develop strategies for overcoming others rather than for simply thinking straight.²

The other thing that studies of human reasoning have shown that

**we have a tendency to embrace information that supports our beliefs
and reject information that contradicts our beliefs.**

So if someone presents us with a set of facts that confirm our belief we are more likely to accept those facts as real.

But if the facts contradict our beliefs,

we will likely reject those facts as fake.

That is, rather than letting the facts dictate our beliefs, we let our beliefs dictate the facts.

This is human nature from a scientific standpoint.
And fascinating to ponder where sin and grace come into play in this picture.

So moving from modern science back to the Bible
and to this debate between the Man Born Blind and the Jewish leaders,
we see the Pharisees digging themselves deeper and deeper into a hole,
by not accepting the facts that are before them,
and rejecting what is right before their eyes.
They do this because the facts do not fit with their preconceived notion
of what God does and doesn't do,
and more importantly,
**the facts do not serve to keep them in power
in their social group.**

The man, however, is in no mood to debate.
**He has just received his sight from Jesus,
and he is not about to become disloyal to the one who has healed him.**
But these leaders of the Jews
cannot accept his experience for what it is.
Rather, they adamantly insist on "what they know":
*"This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath."
"Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner."
and
"We know that God has spoken to Moses,
but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."*

To which man who had formerly been blind responds,
with one of the best comebacks in the Bible,
*Here is an astonishing thing!
You do not know where he comes from,
and yet he opened my eyes.
We know that God does not listen to sinners,
but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.
Never since the world began has it been heard
that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.
If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."*

Have you ever noticed that
that the people who are the most certain of themselves,
who are most sure that what they know is true,
who are most sure that they know God's will,
are those who are most unable truly to see.

It is human tendency to have way more confidence in our understanding of things
than is warranted by our actual knowledge.

And so these entrenched Jewish leaders move in the opposite direction of the Man Born Blind.

As his vision gradually becomes clearer,
they gradually become more and more blind,
until at the end they ask Jesus,
"Surely we are not blind, are we?"
And Jesus answers them,
*"If you were blind, you would not have sin.
But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*

It is a sad story. And a very human story.

But the Man Born Blind who has now received his sight,
finds that he has received so much more than just physical sight from Jesus.

The gift of physical sight is truly amazing.
And we who are sighted probably can't fully appreciate the experience
of a man who, never having seen, is suddenly gifted with eyes
to see the world
in all its color and variety and depth and dimension.

But beyond this amazing gift,
this man also receives the gift of spiritual sightedness.

Just as in the story last week of the Samaritan woman at the well,
the man progresses in his understanding of who Jesus is:
first, he knows Jesus as the one who gave him his sight;
then as a prophet;
then as one sent from God;
and finally, he believes in Jesus as the Son of Man;
as the light of the world.

And receiving *this* sight, *this* faith in Jesus,
means that this man will begin to know and to live
the abundant life
Jesus came to give.

So what about your story?
Where are you on your progression?
In your relationship...
...with the One who restores our sight?

Those with eyes to see, let them see.

¹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 2012) 52-60.

² “Why Facts Don’t Change Our Minds,” by Elizabeth Kolbert in *The New Yorker*, February 27, 2017. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>. Accessed March 25, 2017.