

"Was Blind, But Now..."

Psalm 23; John 9

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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"There are none so blind as those that will not see" is an old proverb. That is the irony of today's Gospel: a man born blind "seeing" clearly, literally and spiritually; and his accusers, who should have had 20-20 spiritual sight without corrective lenses, appear to be blind as bats. "Blindness," spiritually speaking, is more than just the failure of the optic nerve.

What about this man? We know he was born blind but in every other way it intimates that he is normal. He could hear, taste, smell and feel. But sight was a gift he did not have. One could argue that isn't all bad. The prejudices that come with sight—of race and culture, of clothing or jewelry, of the kind of car we drive or the neighborhood we live in—would have made no difference to him.

Yet anyone with blindness knows the handicap it is. I watched my mother cope with macular degeneration, gradually robbing her of the gift of sight. As an avid reader her loss was particularly grievous. Yet she fought back, learning in her 80's how to use a computer to magnify type; continuing to sing in the choir with the help of her director who magnified the music; and even near the end of her years taking my wife's face in her hands at their first meeting so that my mother, with the little peripheral sight that remained, could see Carol's countenance and declare, "You are beautiful." Taped to my mother's computer screen was 2 Corinthians 5:7: *"We walk by faith, not by sight."*

Yet this man in the story, the man born blind, had never seen ANYTHING: the beauty of a sunrise, a great work of art, waves crashing on the seashore, a grandchild's first steps. His handicapping condition, and the discomfort it causes some of us, is reflected in the disciples' question to Jesus: *"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* It is an odd, perhaps even callous question: unless you believe everything is cause-and-effect. Cause-and-effect. Bad things happen to bad people. Good things

happen to good people. In a cause-and-effect world, everything is orderly, predictable and understandable. If you study hard you excel. If you work hard you prosper. We know that some students who study hard don't excel and some hard workers don't prosper; yet many hold on to this cause-and-effect way of thinking.

Jesus resists that. He says the man's blindness is so the works of God might be revealed in him. Even in adversity God's work might be revealed. Even in a time of war God's work might be revealed. Whatever adversity we face is a window to God's love.

Human-interest stories often follow a script of accomplishments achieved by adversity overcome. Two of our hymns today are by Fanny J. Crosby, two among the over 8,000 she wrote. The anniversary of her 206th birthday is March 24. Fanny Crosby was rendered blind at six months of age due to a doctor's error. Yet she wrote so many hymns that she had to use over 200 pseudonyms in her career because publishers did not want to include so many hymns in their hymnals from a single author. And some of those pseudonyms were men's names because prejudice against women authors was, and remains, real. Yet before her death and burial in Mountain Grove Cemetery in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Fanny Crosby overcame her physical blindness and the blindness of some of her publishers, leaving a financial legacy in the form of the senior care facility, Crosby Commons, part of The United Methodist Homes complex in Shelton, Connecticut. The works of God can be revealed in our disabilities.

Unlike Fanny Crosby, the man in the story does not remain blind. His healing is the "work of God" of which Jesus speaks. It is a strange miracle unless we know that the ancients believed that the spittle of a holy person could heal. So Jesus spits into the clay, makes a mudpack and—BEHOLD!—the man could see. Colors and birds and Litchfield County valley and mountain vistas. Is the word "ecstasy" large enough to capture the moment?

Yet seeing with such clarity, especially for the first time, can be startling. Some will recall the television program "Modern Family" airing from 2009 – 2020. One character, Jay, the much older

husband of Gloria, tries to convince her to wear glasses. Her vanity and fear of aging causes her to resist. Finally, she dons glasses: and recoils in shock when she realizes just how old Jay looks! (You will note that I discourage Carol from wearing her glasses!)

"Seeing is believing" the old saying goes, but seeing can also cause us to feast our eyes on temptation. Consider the clergyman who decided on a fair Sunday morning, with weather like last Tuesday, to skip church and play golf. He rasped into the phone to his Lay Leader that he had a "condition" and she would need to cover the service. Such a last minute decision meant he had to play alone, but he loved the game. Lining up on the first tee, he could see the flag waving from the cup several hundred yards off.

About that time Satan said to God, *"Hey, God, isn't that one of yours down there on the Lord's Day?"* God looks out over the battlements of glory and sighs, *"Yes."* *"Well,"* Satan grunts, *"aren't you going to do something?"* About that time the reverend swings the club back and hits the ball straight off the tee, exactly where he envisioned it would go: up the fairway, past the water hazard, over the rough, up onto the green, slowed toward the cup, caught the lip, rolled on the edge and fell *"Plop!"* into the cup. A hole in one!

Satan, disgusted with the whole affair, says to God, *"Now look what you've done! How can you let him get away with this?"*

God smiled and replied, *"Ah! But who's he going to tell?"*

The restoration of sight of a man born blind should prompt ecstasy, not shocked recoil or a temptation to sin. Yet in the Gospel story, those who should have been ecstatic—the spiritual leaders of the community—are both. They launch an investigation. Is this really the man born blind? And who is this Jesus? All that is wrong with religion comes into view: fear, power and control, lack of faith. Interrogating the man's parents proves fruitless. In desperation the inquisitors, unable to name the healer or discredit the healing, call the man back again. *"Tell us what happened,"* they demand. And the once blind man gives as simple an answer as you and I could imagine: *"I was blind, but now I see."*

The response of the religious leaders makes me wonder about the blindness I have—and maybe you, too?—that is not a failure of the optic nerve. Do we look away when we see another who is different? If we view life as “cause-and-effect,” do we judge so quickly those whose circumstances are adverse? Are we mindful that all the precautions in the world will not cure us from being risk-averse? What then? Will compassion or judgment rule our hearts?

One cannot escape the connection between the blind man’s testimony and the hymn, “Amazing Grace.” The man declared, “*One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.*” (John 9:25b) And John Newton, author of “Amazing Grace,” affirmed, “*I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*” John Newton was popularized in our time in the 2006 movie “Amazing Grace” which you can view on Amazon Prime. Newton was captain of a slave ship, converted to Christ, left that evil life and became a cleric at the village of Olney in southeast England. His tombstone epitaph in St. Peter and St. Paul Anglican Church in Olney, where he served as a curate for 16 years, and written by Newton himself, reads:

John Newton, Clerk,
once an infidel and libertine
a servant of slaves in Africa was
by the rich mercy of our
Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,
preserved, restored, pardoned,
and appointed to preach the faith he
had long labored to destroy.

Yet we, who so often limit this to the intensely personal conversion that it was, miss the social impact of Newton. Imagine the burden of guilt Newton must have carried, knowing how many people he transported to a lifetime of slavery and ignoble death. So his personal conversion did not stop with leaving the slave trade and becoming a clergyman. He also worked for the eradication of the British slave trade led by Member of Parliament William Wilberforce. His personal conversion galvanized him to work for systemic change. What systemic

changes are we galvanized to work for because we are disciples of Jesus? Human trafficking? Immigration reform? Racial reconciliation?

The Good News for us today is that the man in John 9 had his optic nerve healed. But more than this, he was given the spiritual sight of his Savior. But more than this, we can be healed of our spiritual blindness. Whatever we carry that blinds the eyes of our heart to God's goodness, we can bring to God in Jesus Christ, who enlightens our eyes, lightens our load and inspires us to reach out with healing and hope to others. And as with the man born blind, this will surely reveal the glory of God in us. Amen.