

Sermon – March 19, 2023 – Lent 4 - Blindness

This morning I am going to talk to you about blindness; spiritual blindness, a challenge just as much as physical blindness.

We have a long Gospel today, an involved story; a tale with a number of twists and turns.

The healing of the blind man is actually the backdrop for the blindness of the Pharisees. They could not see Jesus and that is the problem.

This Gospel could even be made into a play. My study Bible provides helpful headings:

Overall Title: Jesus, the light of the world is made manifest.

Scene 1 – Jesus and the Disciples

The disciples suggest sin causes physical afflictions.

Scene 2 – Jesus heals the blind man

Scene 3 – The Healed Man is questioned by his neighbours.

His faith develops.

Scene 4 – The Healed Man & the Pharisees.

The 2nd stage of faith – Healed Man says ‘He is a Prophet’.

Scene 5 – The Jews and the Parents.

The parents fear being put out of the synagogue, so do not speak.

Scene 6 – 2nd Interrogation of the man by the Pharisees

3rd stage of faith - ‘One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’

Scene 7 – Jesus finds the man

4th stage of faith – Jesus reveals himself as ‘the Son of Man’ and the man believes

Scene 8 – Jesus confronts the Pharisees

He says either they are blind but sin by refusing to acknowledge it, or they are not blind and sin willfully.

In the story, the blind man’s vision gradually increases. Not only does he see with his eyes, but he’s also seeing with the eyes of his heart. He is seeing that Jesus is special and is drawn to his light. In direct contrast, the Pharisees are ‘not seeing’ and not understanding. They are moving away from Jesus. Away from the light and they cast the healed man out.

This drama about the blind man and the Pharisees is part of a larger drama. Dark clouds are gathering around Jesus and his ministry. The Pharisees, so threatened by Jesus have already sent the temple police to arrest him. People complained about Jesus saying

‘I am the bread of life.’. He said he was the new bread from heaven; not like the manna sent from heaven to the Israelites in the wilderness. Manna only kept them going for a day, but Jesus’ bread, his own body, would give them life forever.

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus of the need to be born again spiritually. He offered

himself as living water to the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus has so much to offer us. What a pity that some were scared off.

Jesus knew some did not believe, even amongst his disciples. Jesus knew some were looking for an opportunity to kill him. His claims to some must have seemed outlandish,... way out there. He even asked the crowd in the temple one day why they were looking for an opportunity to kill him.

There was a great deal of tension even before today's story. Jesus knew the Pharisees' blinders extended further than discrediting him. There was something ominous...and it was death.

I'm going to ask you a question now. 'Who is it that you relate to most in the story?' How many of you would say you identify most with the Pharisees?

Probably not many of you.

Do you know the Beatles song 'He's a real nowhere man?'

He's a real nowhere man

Sitting in his nowhere land

Making all his nowhere plans

For nobody.

Doesn't have a point of view

Knows not where he's going to

Isn't he a bit like you and me

He's as blind as he can be

Just sees what he wants to see

Nowhere man, can you see me at all?

Mr 'Nowhere Man' misses the point. But the song lyrics ask us an important question. Isn't he a bit like you and me?

We identify more easily with the blind man whose eyes are opened and whose inner sight is clear. He speaks plainly to the Pharisees before they throw him out.

HE is enlightened and fearless. Yes, that's us, and yes that could be so.

But aren't we also a bit like the Pharisees; with our sense of the way things are supposed to be ironclad. Are we settled into the groove so well that it has become a rut called 'our way', convinced that it is the only way?... Unable to see how the Spirit of Christ blows in fresh ways today?

Several years ago a priest preached a sermon on the rigidness of the Pharisees. He had folded into each bulletin, adhesive labels which said either

"I'M ALWAYS RIGHT!" or "I MIGHT BE WRONG."

He asked people to stick the labels on and to wear them. It brought about many comments and laughter. But on the way home that day, the minister forgot he was still wearing his label which read I'M ALWAYS RIGHT!

At the gas station he received a cool response from the attendant. When he stopped at the grocery store, the clerk seemed almost afraid of him, and conversation was

brief. It wasn't until he got home, that his wife, pointing to the sticker exploded. "You're not always right! In fact, you're rarely right!" And then he remembered the gas station and the grocery store, and realized the effect being absolutely right had had. It stifled conversation, and created a barrier which isolated him. So these days, the minister of that parish wears a new label. It says:

I might be wrong. I might not understand it all.

Someone else might have something to offer.

Clara Barton a well known American humanitarian who died in 1912, epitomizes the opposite of the Pharisee club.

Despite being a woman, she managed to find her way behind the lines in the American Civil War, delivering medical supplies and nursing the soldiers. After the War, she was commissioned by Abraham Lincoln to find missing soldiers. She became involved in Europe in the International Red Cross and later established the American Red Cross in the United States.

Throughout her life, Clara Barton led by example. In an era when travel was arduous, and many men and almost all women stayed close to home, Miss Barton traveled far and wide looking for new challenges. She said this:

I have an almost complete disregard of precedent and a faith in the possibility of something better. It irritates me to be told how things always have been done ... I defy the tyranny of precedent. I cannot afford the luxury of a closed mind. I go for anything new that might improve the past.

Jesus' appearance was something new. He is the New Covenant. He is sent by God because 'God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, to bring us new life with him.'

Perhaps the Pharisees' could not see because deep down they were afraid. They were threatened by Jesus. They didn't know how to understand him and so they opposed him.

Like Clara Barton, we cannot afford the luxury of a closed mind. When Jesus leaves, he promises the Holy Spirit. In the Holy Spirit, God reveals the full depth of the new covenant. God wants to be as close to us as our breath. God wants to breathe in us, so that all we say, think and do is completely inspired by God. God is God-within-us. Thus God's covenant reveals to us how much God loves us.

During the remainder of Lent, let us ask God for the grace to be open to the activity of God's spirit in us and in our community today. Amen