

“THE BLIND MAN LOOKED BACK...”

**Text: “One thing I know; once I was blind, but now I can see, the light of the world is Jesus.”
John 9:25**

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The Blind Man Looked Back...” I selected this topic a long time ago, as set forth in the Lectionary Readings for this Sunday. Then I turned up at the Lenten Service in our Sanctuary last Thursday Noon, which by the way I noticed that most of you forgot to attend. I was privileged to listen to a meaningful little sermon by Nadine Moran, a member of Sharon Church, who is preparing to be an ordained Presbyterian minister. She was superb. I gulped however, when I realized that she was preaching on my exact same topic. I dare say that hers was a dandy of a sermon. In fact it was better than my own sermon, I mean at that point, three days ago. So, I worked furiously Friday and Saturday to polish it up, and by this morning I am ready for a sermon competition with Nadine. I thought about inviting her to return today for a repeat; but then I decided that I had better turn up myself, especially since I was away in sunny Florida last Sunday Morning. So I push on, fearful that those 17 or so of you who managed to make it last Thursday might feel you are getting a little leftover sermon.

But alas, this widely known miracle of the blind man in John 9 bears repeating. It is a masterpiece. There are several other stories of blind men who received their sight in the Gospels. In Matthew 9:27 Jesus healed two blind men by touching their eyes. In 12:22, he cured a demoniac who was both blind and mute. Later, in 20:30, two blind men cried out for mercy and the Lord Jesus opened their eyes as a result of their faith. In Mark 10:46 Blind Bartimaeus begged Jesus to let him see again; he did, after which he too followed the Lord.

But this distinctive story appears only in John. Let me give you my take on the story. I will scatter the sermon around as we proceed. But, I will not to alert you in advance as to where you can find it. Some of you will not like that. In John 8, the chapter just before the miracle, Jesus had spoken out loud to his disciples that he was God’s Messiah and more, he also said that he was “The Light of the World”. The Pharisees overheard him and were naturally furious: “How can you, a-wanna-be-prophet from the hick town of Nazareth, have the gall to say that? We are the light of the world. The Torah and the Psalms are ‘a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path.’ Who on earth do you think you are?” Jesus added insult to injury when he told them that he was also more important than Abraham. And right there, on sacred ground, the kind and loving local Ministerial Association was getting ready to bash him to death with stones, for blasphemy. But, it says, he disappeared from their sight. Jesus chose not to attack them,

or to argue with them or even to defend himself. It was too late. It was time to head home, to march on up the road to Jerusalem and the final confrontation at Calvary.

Chapter 8 is a contentious and troubling chapter: First there were these arguments with the Pharisees; then Jesus told his followers that he would be rejected and suffer and die, and added that some of them would face the same. I was glad when the chapter was over.

Following all that ferment comes this compassionate healing of the blind man. Listen in: the Bible says, “As he passed by, he saw a man who had been blind from his birth.” Simple enough. Poor man; he never had a chance, short-changed from the start. By the time we meet him he is of age, and he has joined the ranks of the lowly beggars, shaking his little cup, or his hat for some for coin or for whatever any-old-body would deign to give him as he sat at the side of the road.

Beggars make me nervous. I don’t know about you but I get uncomfortable when I see them. I am not sure why. Maybe I have too much and it makes me feel guilty. Or maybe inwardly I feel that the beggar is responsible for his own troubles. They should be out looking for a job. My Dad used to quote II Thessalonians 3:10, “If anyone will not work; let him not eat!” For whatever reason, I feel awkward and uneasy in the presence of beggars. I try to pass them by as quickly as possible, and when I am caught by one at a stop-light, I look down and fiddle with my radio, hoping he does not see me, or at least that the beggar does not look me in the eye. Our faith trains us to be kind to the poor; how to do it is the problem. If I give some money, they will probably go out and spend it on booze.

Experts tell you not to give money to beggars; but I am a soft touch. I usually give them something in hopes that it might help; or at least it gets me out of there with a good conscience. Most people I know and self conscious when they come across someone shaking an old tin cup, or with a hand printed sign, asking for help. Mostly, people look away, or to use the words of the Bible says, they “pass by” on the other side.

But watch Jesus here. “As he passed by” it says, “he saw the blind man, i.e., he looked the blind man in the eye, and saw what the man needed. Of course the blind man couldn’t see back. How marvelous of our Lord: he never passed anybody by. He stopped and looked at everyone and he absorbed their hurt and pain and loneliness into himself. He wore himself out. He hoisted their burden up on his own shoulder and carried it, and them, along. Praise the Lord.

You and I tend to pass people by all the time. Maybe it’s a blind beggar, or a cripple on the street, or a homeless man in the park, or a cold and hungry misfit. But, bring it closer: it can also be someone you know: your own wife or husband or aunt or uncle or parent, a friend or neighbor. Maybe it is the protesters on the city streets who want us to change our way of doing things. Maybe it is someone protesting the War, or the green earth folk, or handicapped children, or maybe it is someone who got himself into trouble. Talk about sins of omission.... It could be a child in your own home.

For example, I have an old friend who told me that while his eldest son was growing up he never realized, never even suspected, that the boy might be gay. He kept teasing him, trying to get him to go out on dates and get married. Try not to get caught up in the

argument of what you or I should think about how our societies and churches should treat gay and lesbian people. The point is how a kind and loving father passed his own son by, a Christian father who adores for his wife and children with all his might. But he was so busy thinking and doing and providing all the things he thought they needed, that he never looked into the eyes of his son. And when he finally had to, he was sorry and he cried.

Another man I know had a daughter who grew up in a happy Christian home. Good people all, but this one daughter was difficult to handle. The father thought she was just stubborn and confused. So was he. He tried all the schemes you read about in books and papers; in those days it was Dr. Spock and things like that. It turned out that she had an illness; she was manic depressive, or as we call it now bi-polar. She wasn't a trouble maker; at least she did not want to be. She had an illness, and he never realized it until long after she had left the family home.

My point and plea is to be careful. There are myriads of people around us with uncommon needs. They are dying for lack of love; they are dying of hunger. They are dying from prejudice. They are dying of Aid. They are abused and ostracized and in some parts of the world just because they are women. They are struggling with deformities; they are dying of loneliness. Loneliness can kill you; at least it can steal your life away. They are children and young people struggling and dying in battles and they never chose.

I have been to London a number of times since the days when I was a student. But last summer with our grandchildren, we happened on the Monument over near Knights Bridge which I had never seen before. Carved out of a huge block of granite, was a long line of animals, from elephants to horses to little beagles. The inscription read: "In memory of the animals who were killed in British Wars." Then it said, "They never got to choose!" I was touched, not only because I love animals, but because it stretched out in my soul to say the same for that innumerable company of children and adults who never chose to engage in the battles they were and are forced to fight in body, mind or soul.

My point and plea is to be careful. Our Lord never passed anybody by. He looked inside the beggars and the lonely and the hungry and the homeless and the blind. He lives inside the difficult child just as surely as he lives inside you and me. The eyes of Jesus look back from every pair of eyes we see.

But, we better return to the blind beggar in John 9. Notice that he never asked for help as all the other beggars did. I wonder why: why a person who obviously needed help refused to ask for it? I don't know? Maybe he was one of those who was taught to be independent. Even blind, he might have been told to look out for himself. Maybe he was shy. Maybe he had been "passed by" so many times that he lost his faith in people. Life can do that to you. I think John is saying that the blind man had given up hope. "Nobody cares, and I know it." So he sat there with his tin cup, but he never even shook it, and he never asked for help. Until the day that Jesus came walking by. And look what happened then. Oh happy day.

When they came upon the man the disciples turned it into a theological discussion. They wanted to know who was at fault. “Master, who sinned, this man or his parents?” Now the book of Job had settled that issue three hundred years before, but it is a settlement they never really agree to. And we have not bought into it entirely either. If things turn sour, we tend to think that someone must have done something wrong to deserve it. One brilliant theological friend told me when his terminal cancer was announced years ago, that while he could handle it, still, late at night, he sometimes whispered to himself, “Why me? I must have done something.” The disciples asked: what caused this at his birth, his parents’ sin, or some original sin within this man?” Jesus fired back, “Nobody caused it!” Things sometimes just happen.

Be careful, I know that sometimes we are the source of our own troubles. I mean, touch fire and you get burned. Fail to take care of yourself and your body will remember. Plant turnip seeds and turnips will come up, every time. Browning said that life gives us back, just what we ask. There is often a casual connection; but not always. Jesus told them it that no one sinned. The blindness came so that “the works of God would be manifested through Him.” I don’t know how far I can embrace that concept. Whether it is always true is an open question to me, but it was surely true in John 9.

But anyway, Jesus took made some mud out of his own saliva and the dust on the ground. He spread it over the man’s eyes, and sent him to the Pool of Siloam to wash it off. It is as if the Lord was saying, “You have to do something in order to be healed. You have to take the first step, and then I will lead you on to the next one.” I know a lot of people with a ton of problems but they refuse to take the first step to solve them. They sit around waiting for something to happen, something that never will. You have to step up to the plate before you can hit a homerun. Christ is telling us that if we are serious about wanting to solve a problem, the first step is to get up and do something about it. The first time it is the dog’s fault; after than it’s you own fault. So the blind man went over to the pool and washed his eyes, and the Bible says succinctly, “He came back seeing.” He was cured of his blindness. He did not know what to make of it himself: all those funny shapes and images never seen before. I once heard a missionary say that when an volunteer ophthalmologist healed a native Indian of blindness, the change was so acute and demanding that the healed man actually said he wanted to be blind again.

Then watch what happens next. He went back to his own neighborhood and his old neighbors saw him walking around without assistance, and he was not tripping over the rocks or running into trees. Some of them could not believe that it was the same man. (Did you ever know a person who went away and came back different?) “Hey lookee here, that’s old Zeke, the Blind Beggar!” “No, he’s blind; this man can walk.” “Sure looks like him.” “Nah, he must have a twin brother.” The formerly blind man kept saying, “I am the man. It’s me!” They kept asking, then how is it that you see?” He said, “The man called Jesus opened my eyes.” “How did he doe it?” “I don’t know. He told me to wash the mud out of my eye.” They said, “That’s impossible and they formed a committee and escorted him over to the local authorities. That’s the way we do it in Presbyterianism: Form a Committee and let somebody else handle it.

But, now the Pharisees, the Town Council have their turn. The man repeated his story, and listen, “The religious authorities decided to charge Jesus with blasphemy. He had performed the made clay and performed the miracle on the Sabbath Day, and it was

forbidden to make clay and to heal a person on the Sabbath, unless life was at stake. They missed the point that only God can change a heart, or changed a blind man's eyes and heart. The man asked simply, "How can a man do healings if he is a sinner, it seems as though God is on his side."

Flummoxed they called for the parents of the man and asked them, "Hey, is this your son and was he born blind?" Think about it. What a stupid, cruel and awful question! If you have ever had or know a child with a special need or disability, you can barely fight back the tears. "Is this our son? Of course it's our son. We have prayed for him every night for all these days and decades. And, was he blind from his birth. Of course he was. We could never forget the day the doctor told us he would not be normal. How could you ask us such a question? He is of age, ask him." John adds that they were afraid the Pharisees would throw them out of the synagogue.

So they called the once blind man back and swore him in. "Under oath now, tell us what happened." The man responded, "I already told you and you refused to listen. Why would you listen if I told you again?" They insisted that Jesus was a sinner. The man said, "It is astonishing to me. I don't know as much as you, but one thing I do know, 'Once I was blind, but now I can see, the light of the world is Jesus.'" And they were so frustrated because they could not refute his argument, that they threw him out of the courtroom.

When Jesus heard that he had been expelled and he went looking for the blind man who could not see. As John of Chrysostom summarized it: "The Pharisees cast the man out of the Temple, but the Lord of the Temple went out and found him." And, he will come and find you as well. Jesus asked the man if he believed in the Son of Man. He said he did not know who the Son of Man was. Jesus said, "You are speaking to him; it is I. (Ego emi.)" He said, "Lord, I believe." The Blind man looked back and said, "I believe. Look, I am blind no longer."

Did you notice the progression? At the beginning of the story, he told his neighbors that a "man called Jesus" had healed him. By verse 17, he was saying to the Pharisees, "That man is a Prophet." By the end of the story, he knew he had been healed by the one who was "The Son of Man." Jesus added, "I came so that those who could not see will see, and those who refuse to see will become blind." If you follow me, you will never walk in darkness again.

So, to end. I know a lot of people who are blind, I mean spiritually blind. They have blind spots in their lives. Like the Pharisees they think they have the only way to look at things. Their selfishness insists that they always get their own way. Their insecurities are so deep, they are afraid to let even a loved one look inside, afraid of what another might see. Blind, because looking they see only what they want to see. Blind in the grudges they hold, insults they hurl, secret thoughts and sins in the darkness, thinking God does not see them, or if He does see does not care. I know a lot of people who keep stumbling around in the dark, tripping over one excuse and another, running into trees along the way, trying to get away from themselves, refusing to ask for help, making a mess of what little time they have. We have such a little way to go together; we should be kinder to each other.

I know a lot of people who are lost in the dark of not knowing what to do next, but still pretending that they do: good, stalwart, regular, participating members of the Church. And all that will continue until you turn your life and its control over to Jesus Christ: who has already redeemed you and offers you his peace, and whose Grace will see you through to the end, from here to eternity. Until we look with the eyes of Jesus, we are perennially blind.

The two great moments of your life are still the same: the moment you are born, and the moment you discover why. The blind man discovered his “Why” the day that Jesus noticed him by the side of the road. It could be that he is passing by your way just now, peering into your eyes and soul, wondering why on earth you refuse to look back, why you insist on leaning on your own resources; why you never ask for help; why you do not get up and take the first step over to meet him at the pool of Siloam. Christ will be there, waiting for you.

One day at the beginning of time, it says in Genesis One, darkness covered the face of the deep. The Bible says the day will come, perhaps far away, perhaps not, when darkness will rule the universe again, when the curtain will drop for good and the stage on which we live will turn to dark. Oh dear. “Having eyes, they see not”. But if, when, that day will come, I can assure you, three things will still be true: God will still be God; Christ will still be Christ; and You will still be you. Stop, look and listen...For now and forever more. Amen.