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The National Presbyterian Church

Unclouded Vision

John 9

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This morning we continue our series of sermons in which we're looking together at the story of Jesus through the eyes of Saint John, one of four accounts of Jesus like the ministry that we have in the pages of Holy Scripture. And we come as you've just heard to this extended story in the 9th Chapter of John's gospel, the story of a man who was healed – a man who had been born blind. So far in the first eight chapters of John's gospel we've seen Jesus' life intersect and influence the lives of all kinds of different people. And the more you read the story as a whole, the more you see the variety of these people:

some of them are good, some of them are bad,
some of them are rich, some of them are poor,
some of them are educated, some of them are uneducated,
some of them are powerful, some of them are not powerful,
some of them are from the country, and some of them are from the city.

All kinds of people come to Jesus and he loves them. He understands them. He knows what their needs are and he has the power to help them at their point or their moment of need. And so the crowds begin to flock around Jesus.

And it would seem as if the whole world was going to be happy that this man had somehow entered their lives. But what we find as we read this story is that while the crowds flock to Jesus not everybody does! And even amongst those who flock to Jesus not everybody is happy. There are people in the story, an increasing number of them, who are not happy with Jesus – people who find Jesus' presence to be troubling. People who find that what Jesus says about the world and about human life and about *his* life, is rocking their boat, destabilizing their world. And they grow angry with him. He seems to claim an authority over their lives that they do not like or want. Some of them grow so mad with him, in fact that they plot and plan his death. And, indeed, what we know as we read the rest of the story is that they succeed, that Jesus dies. He dies on a cross. They succeed. But

only in part do they succeed, because Jesus is like a bad penny – he keeps rolling back. They drive him to his death to get rid of him, but he comes back again. Jesus wins in the end . . . But as Jesus' story in John's gospel develops, before his death, and up to his death, it is these folks who oppose Jesus increasingly take the limelight.

In fact when we put the bits and pieces of Jesus' story together not only do we see all of these different kinds of people being blessed by Jesus (in chapters 1-9 especially) but we see a huge portion of the story of Jesus focusing upon his opponents and on their power to put him to death; so that about half the story, almost indeed two thirds of the story is about the rising opposition to Jesus – not about those who love him, but about those who despise him. About those who find him troubling.

And when John tells us his story he tells it this way quite deliberately. Because he wants everybody to know that when Jesus comes into our life he always forces a crisis. He forces people to think about their lives. Not just to say "Oh what a nice man!" But "where is he in my life?" To a certain extent this is a black and white question: Is he in my life or is he out of my life? But actually there are shades of gray to this question as well . . . even if he's in our life the question is this: "Is he out front leading me, pushing me, pulling me, cajoling me, moving me on, like a good shepherd with his sheep (and we'll come to that imagery for Jesus more in John 10); Or do we have Jesus, as it were, in our hip pocket? There as a sort of talisman; for insurance; for safety! We keep him with us so that if things go wrong he'll somehow be close to us. So even if he's here, we have to ask where exactly is he here with us in our lives?

Everything Jesus does forces the question (what philosophers would call the 'existential question') as to where this man is, now, within my life: now! And John tells the story in this provocative way, with this contrast between all these people who *are* blessed by Jesus and these people who *do not* feel blessed by Jesus at all, so that we the readers, reading hundreds, thousands of years later might find the same challenge in our lives today that they found back then.

These questions are forced upon us in our chapter, John 9. This is a chapter in which this challenge becomes perfectly clear because we see these two sides together in this one event.

- We see Jesus profoundly caring for, loving, touching, healing a man born blind. Good Jesus, amazing Jesus. How incredible that this should happen.
- And in this very same story we see these people who are profoundly bothered by Jesus. In fact they are the religious folks, the religious leaders of the day, these Pharisees

Now, please remember that not all the Pharisees were bad. Some of the Pharisees were good. In fact their main intention was wonderful. They were a lay renewal movement within ancient Israel trying to bring people back to the Bible, back to God. Not just in the center, not just in Jerusalem but scattered throughout the length and the breadth of the land trying to restore the people to God). But here they are in our story this good group of people in many ways becoming more and more blind to the very thing that they are pursuing (a healthy relationship with God). A blindness which shows the perniciousness of sin:

- *Wanting to be faithful to the Bible as they understand it, they become faithless to Jesus of Nazareth!*
- *Wanting to keep the Sabbath Day holy, in particular, they become blind to the life-giving power of Jesus who heals this man on the Sabbath Day*

... and for this (*for this!*)n they blame him, and seek his death!

Now the whole issue of the Sabbath Day is an issue that we will pick up some time in the future when we look at the Ten Commandments. What we just need to know today is just this: that this is one of the Commandments we should keep: they were on the right track there. But what becomes clear to all of us I think and this was my intention in reading the whole story, is that *in their pursuit of this one Commandment everything else was losing perspective* – everything else was losing perspective. In pursuing one thing that was right they lost sight of the big picture so that the story becomes almost unbelievably, staggeringly twisted!

Here is a man born blind and he is healed in front of them. And there should be praise; there should be joy; there should be wonder; there should be love! But there's none of that! There's just this deadlines, this deadlines: "*You broke our Commandment! You healed this man on the wrong day!*" They cannot see. They're blind to what's going on here: "In doing good for this man born blind, you broke the Law of God!" How blind is that? Indeed, what they cannot see goes even deeper than that. What they cannot see is that Jesus was actually keeping the Law of God more profoundly than they ever did! For Jesus (and Moses!) keeping the Sabbath was not just about 'doing nothing' but about using God's time for the renewal of life. What Jesus broke was *their understanding* of the Law of God, and they couldn't see the difference between *their understanding* of the Law of God and God's original intent in giving the Law in the first place!

So there's blindness all the way around in this story: not just in the man born blind, but in the religious leaders too! And in their blindness they get mad, they get upset, they get furious! And at this very moment when they

should be filled with praise. And Jesus only makes it worse when he accuses them, needles them, points the finger at them and says that they're part and parcel of this blindness.

Listen to a few verses: Verses 39 through 41 again. Jesus said

'I came into this world for judgment.' [DR: for judgment, BUT not to condemn the world . . . remember from John 3:16-17? Jesus loves the world so much that he dies for the world. He does not come to condemn, but he does come to bring us to the point of judgment – to that place where we make critical decisions with our lives that will prepare us for the moment when we see God face to face. We might paraphrase Jesus like this: 'I came into this world to force the issue'] *so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.'* *Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him 'Surely we're not blind are we?'* [DR: You're not saying this about us are you? . . . which, of course, Jesus is!] *Jesus said to them 'If you are blind, if you are completely blind you would not have sin, you would not be accountable. But now that you say that we see, your sin remains.'* [DR: that is, Jesus is saying, 'Oh, you may be blind but you see enough to remain accountable.']

Over all, though, what Jesus is saying is this: that if you think you see what's going on, think again. It's only those who know they are blind or short sighted or whose vision is fuzzy that I can help. If you don't think that you need help then I probably won't be able to help you.

So the question for us who read this story 2000 years afterwards as well as for those who were with Jesus at the time is this: *How blind are we too? The story is not just about this man born blind. It's about us too! How blind are we? How needy are we? How blurry is our vision in all kinds of different ways? How much do we need the help of Jesus Christ?*

Now blurry vision of course is a part of all of our lives. And as the story would indicate perhaps more than we could ever know. As Paul would write to the Corinthians: 'No eye has seen what God has in store for those who love Him.' (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Two years ago Stanford psychologist Lee Ross conducted a study in which he showed six television news segments from Israel's war in Lebanon to 144 observers, half of whom were pro-Arab and half of whom were pro-Israeli. As you can imagine they saw the television program – these segments – differently. But the massive difference between these two different groups was startling. This is what the report says.

- Pro-Arab viewers heard 42 references that painted Israel in a positive light.

- Pro-Israeli viewers who watched the very same clips spotted only 16 references that painted Israel positively. And 57 references that painted Israel negatively.
- From the Pro-Arab viewers there were 26 references that painted Israel unfavorably. Staggering difference in looking at the same thing, coming from different angles.

What is it that we see or don't see because of some pre-conceived idea within our lives? We're blinder, says Jesus, than we think!

I sometimes realize this when I'm driving down the street – a street, say, I have driven down for many years. I turn my head to the right or to the left and I suddenly see a house that I've never seen before. I don't know if you ever have that experience. "So where did that come from?" My wife nudges me and says well it's been there all the time. And for the most part it has. But it just doesn't enter my mind.

It reminds me of the time when I finished my doctoral dissertation many moons ago. I gave my dissertation to two friends to critique, not for the subject matter (I wanted to graduate! I didn't want any more critique of content at this stage!) – but to critique for grammar so that it could be printed in the right form. These were two bright folks. One of them found a couple of dozen grammatical mistakes: commas, errors in grammar here and there. The other found *a couple of hundred!* So when I got it back from him there were red marks all over the place. And once I got over my frustration that he should find all these flaws in my work, I was able to begin to see that he had done me a favor. *He* could see in the most amazing way in which neither I nor my other friend could see.

Some people see things that we don't see and in their seeing they show up how blind we are.

Steve Jobs (who died last week) is amongst those who really could see, couldn't he? – see things that other people couldn't see. And not only could he see them, but he could see how to implement what he saw in his mind. This is staggering vision, that this one man had, and it's in contrast to the blindness of other people.

I found this quote this past week from Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union in the 1950s. He said this, 1956, he said in a conversation with Sir William Hayter: "Every year humanity takes a step towards Communism. Maybe not you, but at all events your grandson will surely be a Communist."

Not much foresight there as to what was going to happen in the world. Or what about this one from *Forbes Magazine* in July 1938.

“The use of aircraft over water has much to be said for it. They present however one tremendous difficulty – to get off the ground with the weight of passengers, freight and mail and fuel requires a landing field of gargantuan proportions. Certainly there are no fields today in either the US or Europe which could accommodate such a plane, [DR: Probably true. But then this comment] and it may be impracticable ever to build them.

Not exactly foresight looking into the future and seeing what was going to happen all over the world. And even Warren Buffett who can see more things about money than most of us care to imagine and we’d like some of his insight there. In a Time magazine article I read this week about Warren Buffett, it related that his late wife said that when he comes into the kitchen he couldn’t see far enough ahead to prepare a can of soup!

So here’s this man who has this amazing insight in one area of his life but in another there is blindness. And surely this is true for all of us in one way, shape or form – all blind, perhaps more than we know, in one part of our lives or another.

And the scriptures say that it is this simple observation, this simple realization, which is the beginning of something good. It brings us to that place where we turn to Jesus who can give sight and say, “Jesus, I need your help!”

The man born blind had no problem receiving help, either for physical sight or for spiritual sight. He knew he had a problem. He knew he was blind. Not only *physically*: as we read the story, the extended story, we realize that he comes to see that he is blind *spiritually* as well – that he does not see spiritually as he ought to see. And we see this spiritual light turning on inside him as he wrestles both with Jesus enemies and as he wrestles and toys with Jesus himself. Listen again. We pick up the story at Verse 28:

Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple. But we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses but as for this man we do not know where he comes from.”

The man answered, “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.”

They answered him: “You were born entirely in sins and are you trying to teach us?” Then they drove him out . . .

Jesus heard that they’d driven him out and when he found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man? [DR: A spiritual question] He answered, “And who is he sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

Jesus said to him, “You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he.”

He said, “Lord I believe and he worshipped him. He worshipped him.

This is a staggering thing: ‘he worshiped him!’ This takes us back to the Ten Commandments, the First Commandments – “You shall have no other Gods before me. You shall make no graven images.” Yet this man bows down before a fellow man and worships! Unless this man is God he is breaking the commandments! It’s a staggering moment. And it arises when Jesus speaks to him and says to him, “You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he.” You have seen him.

Unfortunately one of the things we cannot see in English is a change in the verb “to see” in the original Greek of John’s account. All the way through this story the verb “to see” is the verb ‘blepō’, a verb that refers to regular sight. But when we come to this verse, John changes the verb. It is now ‘oraō’ and ‘oraō’ means not just ‘sight’ but ‘perception’ – the eyes of the mind, the eyes of the heart. As if Jesus is saying “You now see not only with your eyes, but with the eyes of your mind and the eyes of your heart.”

And this changes everything. He does not see Jesus as being in his hip pocket: someone useful whom he can control. No! Jesus is the one before whom he bows down in worship and to whom he owes and gives his life. And the difference in the man is clear: *in seeing Jesus with his eyes and with the eyes of faith this man finds an amazing strength and amazing courage that sets him free.* He has been set free in every dimension of his life – this man born blind. And he now stands in sharp contrast to those shriveled up religious folks whose unredeemed vision focuses on something which in and of itself is good, but is out of proportion with the whole of the will of God. And, now, because they don’t even want to see any more, they are left in that state: shriveled up, harsh, cold, brittle and loveless. May God preserve us from that as we seek to follow this Jesus!

He says to us, he says **to us** (!),

“I have come into the world for judgment!”

. . . not to condemn but to force a crisis in our lives so that we make choices about him that will lead to life when we meet God face to face. He comes to prepare us for that decisive moment and he says that decisive moment is now.

“I have come into this world for judgment!”

. . . *to help people become the people they were created to be.*

“So that those who do not see” (who know it may seek help) may see, and that those who do see (or at least think they do, and this is the rub) may become blind.”

May God help us each one to know that we do not see, and so go to Jesus again and again, and ask that this one who healed this man born blind, might give us sight – constantly, day after day, until we see God face to face. Sight! New sight! Life-giving sight to our lives while we have breath within us.

Let us bow before God in prayer. Holy God we see much but we do not see as we ought to see. Help us to know that, to find a sense of humility that comes by Your Spirit so that in humbling ourselves before You, the giver of sight, we may begin to see the glory of your creation and of your redemption for us through Jesus Christ. And so that others may see us. They look at this part of your church, a light shining with His light that they long to embrace. Hear this our prayer. It is through Christ the Light of the World that we pray. Amen.

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