

## The Fear of Seeing

John 9:1-41

Fourth Sunday in Lent, (March 2) 2008

Kyle Childress

*The most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance that fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill. The soul of the murderer is blind; and there can be no true goodness nor true love without the utmost clear-sightedness.*

-Albert Camus, *The Plague*

Our Gospel reading today is high drama, full of symbol and metaphor, joy and disappointment, courage, highs and lows, sight and blindness. From the first line, “As he went on his way, Jesus *saw* the blind man,” we know that this is about sight and blindness. And since we’re reading John, we know that John will turn the tables on us before it is all said and done, and we’ll be asking who it is who really sees and who is it who is truly blind.

Jesus sees the man. Not like the disciples who see him as an object lesson for an argument over religion, “Master, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Or as an excuse to get into a political debate. Matthew the Tax-Collector might have said, “That blind man is an example of a Marxist-Socialist agenda. If the Left was not trying to coddle him, he wouldn’t be blind.” And Simon the Zealot, perhaps replied, “If you Right-Wingers would quit being both

ignorant and arrogant, we could regulate the price-gouging pharmaceutical corporations so this guy could afford his anti-blind medicine.”

Jesus is not interested in a political debate or a theological discussion; he goes into action. He spat on the ground, made a muddy paste, and spread it on the man’s eyes. Then he said, “Go and wash in the pool of Siloam.” When the man returned, he could see for the first time in his entire life. But Jesus was nowhere to be found.

Now it gets interesting. The ex-blind man tries to go home but can’t. When he shows up among family and friends as a changed man, there is no celebration, only questions and doubts. “Who are you?” “Who is this Jesus?” “Where is he?” “I don’t know.”

But you know how it is. When our vision changes; we change. How we see, what we see says who we become. Do you see a glass half full or half empty? Do you see challenge or opportunity? Do you see people, or do you see tasks? Do you see the journey, or do you see the end? Do you see a problem needing a solution or a mystery to be lived into? Do you see a person who is begging and needs help, or do you see an argument over social policy? Do you look at Nacogdoches and see the possibility of a diverse community connected and learning to be neighbors with one another? Or do you see a town of discrete individuals each on their own, hunkered down in their own social media world?

Vision, perspective, how we see shapes, even determines what we do. As Stanley Hauerwas says, “We are only able to work in the world we see.” When our sight changes, our work changes. When our vision changes; our lives change. And

then we realize, we're not so sure we want to get well. We're not so sure we want to see differently than we do now. Change is scary. "I might not be able to see well, but I've learned to cope, thank you very much, Jesus."

In the next scene of our story, the former blind man is brought before the religious authorities. And even though he is standing in front of them, they can't admit that he can see. They *refuse to see* who he is. They refuse to believe that change is truly possible. He does not fit into their categories; therefore, he must be wrong, not their categories.

I recall theologian Karl Barth saying stupidity has nothing to do with IQ or with education. Stupidity, he said, was willful ignorance. People choose to be stupid. There are just some things they refuse to believe even if the facts are staring at them. They will dismiss the facts and keep on believing what fits in their worldview.

In his essay, *After Ten Years*, written ten years after the Nazi rise to power, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has a section called, "On Stupidity." Bonhoeffer also says stupidity has nothing to do with IQ or education. He wrote, "One virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with him [or her] as a person, but with slogans, catchwords, and the like that have taken possession of him [or her] . . . Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil."

The religious authorities in this story are stupid. They willfully disregard the man standing in front of them, who used to be blind but now can see.

M. Scott Peck said years ago: “What happens when one has striven long and hard to develop a working view of the world, . . . and then is confronted with new information suggesting that that view is wrong? The painful effort required seems frightening, almost overwhelming. What we do more often than not, and usually unconsciously, is to ignore the new information. . . . We may denounce the new information as false, dangerous, heretical, the work of the devil. We may actually crusade against it, and even attempt to manipulate the world so as to make it conform to our view of reality. . . . Sadly, such a person may expend much more energy ultimately in defending an outmoded view than would have been required to revise and correct it in the first place.” (From *The Road Less Traveled*).

Seeing a blind man, the disciples tried to find someone’s sin behind the blindness. Confronted with a blind man who could now see, the Pharisees tried to find someone’s sin behind the healing. “This so-called healing occurred on the Sabbath! Of course, it is not legal! It is not allowed! It’s not biblical!” Here is a healing that is new and beyond their control and they refuse to see it.

An old friend, Cindy Weber is the retired pastor of Jefferson Street Baptist Church in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. Years ago, she baptized two young men. They had been in a gang, but they became Christian and wanted to be baptized – from a gang to the church, from a life in crime heading for prison or death to new life in Christ. It so happened that a delegation of folks was visiting from a large conservative church in town. The delegation went back and reported to their church and then to the local Baptist association, that a woman was baptizing. Jefferson Street Baptist Chapel was kicked out of the association

because their female pastor baptized. No one ever mentioned the young men who had been converted. No one gave thanks to God.

In our story, the religious authorities bring back the former blind man and demand that he testify that Jesus is a sinner. I love his response: “Whether or not he is a sinner, I don’t know. All I know is this: *once I was blind, now I can see.* I’ve told you how this happened, but you took no notice.” In other words, are you blind?! Then he adds, “Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples?!”

This is one of those places where you slow down this story and ask yourself, “What are they mad about? What are they scared of?” But we know. We know that change is scary. What if change brings about some things we don’t want or don’t like? We cannot control change and we are therefore, threatened by it.

We could tell story after story. A man who had been an alcoholic for over 20 years was celebrating two years of sobriety with some friends. But it was bittersweet. Two weeks before his wife had left him. The change was too much for her. She had grown accustomed to him as an alcoholic.

So, the religious authorities grasp even more tightly to their old world. “Who are you to give us lessons, born and bred in sin as you are?!” Then they expelled him from the synagogue. They disfellowshipped him to use Southern Baptist language.

The blind man discovers there can be a tremendous cost to pay for seeing. For Jesus, the price was the cross.

This story could occupy us for a long time; it is so full. Like any really good story, we find ourselves somewhere in this story. And like any really good story, we will find ourselves in different places in the story from time to time.

The early church saw this story as a parable of their lives. At the beginning they meet Jesus, and he changes them; gives them vision which allows them to see as never before. Through Him they see their enemies as neighbors, they see the oppressed and beaten down people as children of God, they see outcasts as included in the love and grace of God. They see Jesus as a healer and teacher and they see him as Lord and Savior, too. They see differently. But then Jesus steps out of the picture and they have to deal with conflict at home and at the synagogue. Eventually resulting in expulsion from the synagogues. They found themselves as outcasts.

Austin Heights our best testimony has been “I don’t know a lot, but I do know this: I once was blind but now I see.” We have been a church full of people who have learned to see differently. And occasionally, it has caused some controversy.

But let us also admit that sometimes we’re like the religious leaders in this story. We’ve been in our religious institution for some time. It is a good one and we like it. It is comfortable. And we’re not sure we want to see differently. Life is hard and we’re doing all we can to cope.

Three years ago today we began our lockdown due to the Covid pandemic. Our sense of change and confusion and chaos seems to have accelerated since then. We want to return to the stability we remember, or at least some calmness. Austin

Heights is where we have had a sense of belonging and goodness. We don't want to mess it up with new vision, new plans, newness. We're tired of adapting. We're tired of change.

Now, I'll agree with you about this: not all change is good or desirable. Like most anything there is good change and bad change. The question for us is always is it of God or not? Is change in this church, change in your life or in your family, because of the touch of Jesus or not? Is the change from God or not?

The theologian and Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge tells of one time, early in her ministry, when she was visiting a woman in her church who was in a wheelchair for many years. Before Rev. Rutledge left, the woman asked that she be prayed for. Pastor Rutledge held the woman's hand, just as she did with anyone she was praying for or with. She prayed for healing and hope, just as she usually did. Suddenly there was this incredible warmth flooding through Rev. Rutledge's body, flowing through her hands into the hands of the church member sitting in the wheelchair. The woman gasped. They quit praying and the woman got up out of the wheelchair and walked.

Years later, when Rev. Rutledge told this story, she said that was the one and only time something like that ever happened in her long years of serving as a pastor. She was not in the habit of expecting such things before that and she had always kept quiet about it afterwards. It had never happened since, but she had no doubt that God had healed that woman. For whatever reason, God chose to work in that way at that time with that person. And Rev. Rutledge said that she has never gotten over it since.

Fleming Rutledge says that ever since that day, she always is aware that God is at work in ways beyond our understanding. Her job is to be on the lookout for God and God's work. That day how she saw prayer changed. Every time she prays, you never know what might happen.

I tell this with Susan Rushing's permission, but when she was about five years old when she would spend part of her day talking with Wilda Robinson, their family's black maid, while Wilda did the ironing. Wilda had a daughter at home about the same age as Susan as well as another older daughter who cared for the younger sister, while their mom was at Susan's house doing the housework. Susan remembers riding in the car while her mother took Wilda home and how seeing Wilda's house, and Wilda's family, opened her eyes for the first time that this woman had another whole different life with a family. And she would go inside that house after a long day of washing, cleaning, and ironing and wash, clean, and iron all over again. It was the first time Susan's eyes were opened. It changed her.

I remember reading the book *How Did Davy Die?* in a Texas History class at Baylor University. I grew up knowing that there were no eyewitnesses to how Davy Crockett died at the Alamo, but the myth was that Davy died fighting like Fess Parker in the Disney TV show or John Wayne in the movie. My education, and books, however, taught me that there were eyewitnesses at the Alamo. The eyewitness were Mexican army soldiers who saw Davy Crockett exhausted from fighting, surrender, and then executed. These Mexican troops wrote down what they saw in their diaries and in letters back home. That book opened my eyes.

It is an example of why some people want to ban books and control what we read in schools. It's better to have an ignorant, blind populace than an informed,



educated citizenry. People ignorant and blind can be controlled more easily. Meanwhile, we persist and resist by reading, thinking, supporting education, and being people who are learning to see.

Jane remembers having her eyes opened in the fifth grade watching the evening news of Vietnam of soldiers dragging bodies and body bags out of the jungle. At the same time, she had just learned in school that our government is of the people, by the people, for the people. Her eyes were opened, and she saw that she was somehow complicitous.

There's that pesky education again.

I remember a conversation right out by the back door around 1993 or 1994. A stalwart church member and professor at SFA said to me, "I don't believe in homosexuality, but I sure do love Carl and Bill." Carl and Bill were the first openly gay couple who joined Austin Heights and they showed up every Sunday for worship, showed up for every church workday, potluck, Vacation Bible School, Sunday School, and mission activity. And in so doing, they changed the old church member and professor. His eyes were opened because of the witness of two gay men.

My friend Lanny Peters is the retired pastor of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Atlanta. He grew up the mountains of North Carolina. He told me that he had some friends who had never been out of their small town in the hills. The oldest child, a boy of 18 had some sort of medical condition which caused him to drive their old pickup to a neighboring town 20 miles away to see another doctor.

One day the boy came in to see his pastor. “Preacher, I’ve been driving over to Concord once a week for the last couple of months to see my doctor. I have to go over a bridge across that big interstate highway, and I’ve started to wonder. Where are all those cars going? What’s down those roads?”

The pastor looked at the boy and after a bit said, “Well, why don’t you go see for yourself sometime. Why don’t you just turn your car down the ramp and merge in with the traffic and go see where it all goes?”

Several weeks later, he did. With his heart racing, he rode a few miles and turned around. Gradually, he drove a bit further until one day he drove to Kannapolis forty miles away. He’d never seen a city that large before.

A few days later the parents of the boy started a campaign to have the pastor fired.

Because of the grace of God, we’ve let go of our fears and got on that ramp and gone down the highway. The “Amazing Grace Baptist Church” was once blind but now we’re learning to see. We see differently because of the grace of Jesus Christ. All we are called to do is to allow Jesus to touch others so they can see too.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.