

Be Thou My Vision

A sermon taken from John 9, and preached on April 3, 2011 at Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina by Dr. Ken Carter.

We see any given situation through the lens of our own experience; which is to say that none of us sees reality with clear vision. For example, I need these glasses to see farther out into the distance, to drive, to watch a live sporting event or a movie in a theater. I don't need glasses to see up close: a person with whom I am having a meal, reading a book or staring at a computer screen. My vision is far from perfect, and I find that it changes as life moves along.

In the scriptures, beginning with the prophets, there is a struggle to read any given situation in a way that is in synch with God's vision. Along the way there are images of darkness and light, blindness and sight. In the gospel for today, Jesus and his disciples encounter a man who has been blind from birth. So how do the disciples read the situation? Do you remember last Sunday when I was talking about a presumption of judgment and a presumption of grace? Do the disciples ask, "How can we get this man some help?" No. Do the disciples ask, "How can we help this man?" No. The disciples ask, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

What is underneath that question? It was rooted in an assumption---that if you had endured some kind of adversity---you were poor, you were sick, you were disabled, you were grieving a loss---if any of this was your station in life, you must have done something to deserve it! Why? Well, very simply the belief was that God had blessed the righteous and cursed the unrighteous. So, if you are beautiful, privileged and healthy...God must love you more. And if not, you have only yourself to blame. It's just bad karma!

So, who sinned, the man blind from birth, or his parents? It is a presumption of judgment, right? Neither, Jesus says. He was born blind **so that God's works might be revealed in him.**

It is natural for us to try to make sense of human tragedy. After the Haiti earthquakes, for example, we remember a very public response by someone wondering if the sins of the Haitian people had caused the calamity. And then we began to see the responses from people of goodwill and faith. In a situation of dire darkness, the issue is not who caused it---although this is natural for us to wonder about---instead, it becomes the occasion for the works of God to be revealed---healing the sick, compassion alongside the grieving, rebuilding the ruined cities.

The late missionary and theologian Leslie Newbigin wrote these words:

"We can "make sense" of a dark world only by allowing the light to come in, by turning to the light and believing in the one who comes as the light of the world. This is the "work of God", as we learned in John 6. 29 ("that you believe in him who sent me"). And "we"---Jesus and his disciples and the whole church---must be active in doing this work "while it is still day"....We are not dealing with timeless verities in the life of the soul, but ...with real opportunities which must be seized or they will be lost. The Church is not sent into the world to explain the world but to change it."

A presumption of judgment separates us from human need; a presumption of grace leads us to identify with human need. This is at the very heart of the gospel. In a dark and chaotic world God says "let there be light". God so loves the world, that he gives his only Son to be our savior. God sends the Son into the world not to condemn the world (John 3. 17), but so that the world might be saved through him, in other words, through grace.

Judgment is a part of explanation, but as the missionary reminded us, we are not called to explain or judge the world---the apostle Paul asks in Romans 8, "**who is in a position to condemn?**". We are called to change the world, to be a part of its salvation.

The image in our gospel for today is vivid: Jesus says, of himself, "**as long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.**" And then he spits on the ground and makes mud with his saliva, and spreads the mud in the man's eyes". Why spit? In the ancient world the basic elements of life were saliva and blood. He places this substance, which has become something like mud into the man's eyes, and this recalls the act of creation from the dust of the earth.

Then he says, go the pool at Siloam and wash there. The pool of Siloam as associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, and according to the rabbis was a place of purification. The man does this, and he is able to see.

So: a man is born blind, there is a gracious intervention, and then an act of cleansing and healing. You would think this would be cause for rejoicing:

I was blind, but now I see. Praise God! Let's take up the offering and go home!

But, in fact, this is not the case. There is a continuing struggle between light and darkness, and the remainder of John 9, which I will not read, explores this. The Pharisees do not see the healing as a cause for rejoicing; they discount it, question it, investigate it, debate it. The reader of the gospel can come to her own conclusions: the blind see, but those who have the knowledge, the religious people, they miss it. They have become blind.

Over the past few weeks there has been some controversy in the Christian world about a new book by Rob Bell entitled *Love Wins*. Most of us may have become aware of it in the *Observer* article about a young pastor near Durham whose congregation asked him to leave, for posting favorable comments about the book. It turns out the pastor and congregation had a number of issues with each other, so there could be more to the story. But back to Rob Bell. I have heard him speak, and he is an extraordinary preacher of the gospel. He is also an evangelical. More than one of our Sunday School classes have used his videos, and he has a wide following, especially among younger adults.

I have not read *Love Wins*, although it is on my list. My suspicion is that while it is a very creative and compassionate book, it is likely that it breaks no new ground. It is born out of Bell's struggle to reflect on the nature of a God who is both holy and compassionate, just and merciful. In the end, he insists, Love Wins.

You would think this would be cause for rejoicing, right? But his most severe critics have been his evangelical brothers, who wonder about his orthodoxy. He makes too much of God's compassion and not enough of God's holiness, too much of God's mercy and not enough of God's righteousness.

Could it be that those who have the knowledge, the religious people, continue to miss it? Could it be that Bell is wrestling with our question: a presumption of grace or a presumption of judgment? In the end, is it possible that love wins?

Jesus rarely gave direct answers to these kinds of questions. He came into the world not to explain the world, but to change it, one life at a time----Nicodemus, the woman at the well, a boy with five loaves and two fish, a woman caught in adultery, the man born blind, one person at a time, one story at a time.

So the question becomes for us, this morning: where are we in the story?

- Are we coming out of a long darkness, ready for an encounter with the One who will give us sight?
- Or have things been out of focus, and could it be that Jesus wants to give us clarity of vision and purpose?
- Or are we struggling to make sense of the sins of others, sins that seem obvious to us?
- Or do we sense a readiness to move toward someone in need, to help the light to shine in dark places?
- Or, as Christians, do we see ourselves in all of the characters in the 9th chapter of John?

We confess that there is darkness and light inside of us. We know the right path, but we are easily distracted. We see the failures of others more clearly

than we see our own. We know that, because we have been washed with the waters of baptism, we represent Christ in the world: he says of himself, I am the light of the world, but he also says, of us, **you are the light of the world.**

The gospel lesson for today is a long and complex passage about a healing, a man born blind, but like most of John's gospel---the woman at the well in John 4, the feeding of the multitudes in John 5, the woman caught in adultery on John 8---he takes a simple story and uses it as an occasion to make a larger point. We can trace the encounter with the man born blind to the very beginning of the gospel, the one we read at the climax of the service of lessons and carols: **in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.**

This is the judgment of God---for at times, if we are honest, we have all preferred darkness to light, and death to life, but ever more powerfully it is the grace of a God who sends his son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

We look within and we see a mixture of intentional faith and occasional unbelief, spontaneous compassion and guarded selfishness, loving graciousness and eruptive judgmentalism. We look outside at the world and we see unspeakable devastation and sacrificial service, grinding poverty and extravagant generosity. Our calling, the apostle Paul reminds us, is to live in the world as children of the light, and as Jesus teaches, to do the work of God while it is still day.

- In the end, Jesus touches a human life, in the most ordinary way possible, and there is a new creation; the old passes away and everything becomes new.
- In the end, the man born blind is given sight. Love wins.
- In the end, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Source: Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*.