

Light and Darkness, Sight and Blindness

There is a story of a homeless man who was sitting across the street from an artist's studio. The artist saw him and thought he would make an interesting portrait study and, from a distance, he painted the defeated-looking man whose shoulders drooped and whose eyes were downcast and sad. When he was finished, he took the portrait over to the vagrant so he could look at it.

"Who is that?" the homeless man asked.

The painting bore a slight resemblance to himself, but in the painting before him, he saw a person of dignity, with squared shoulders and bright uplifted eyes, almost handsome!

He asked the artist, "Is that me? I don't look like that."

The artist replied, "But that is the person I see in you."

(Brett Blair, www.sermons.com, adapted from 'New Vision in Christ' by Rev. Michael J. Fish)

And, like the artist, God looks into our hearts and sees us as we really are.

But how well do we see Him?

Fully or selectively?

At some point or another in our lives, we experience selective use of our five senses. Every second, our brains are bombarded with sensory data.

For example: you just sat down after the Gospel reading, but already your brain has probably stopped consciously registering the hardness of your seat in the pew. You're not thinking about the temperature of the nave, although you may have at one point this morning.

There are all kinds of background sounds that you're not focussing on right now - the faint coughing of your neighbour, maybe somebody shifting in their seat near you. Our brains would go crazy if they had to process every piece of data that our bodies sense.

We think we're seeing everything, but we're all being selective all the time.

No doubt you've noticed who's not here, who's sitting in a different spot, who's sitting with whom. You may have wondered what it means that so-and-so isn't sitting with their usual friend.

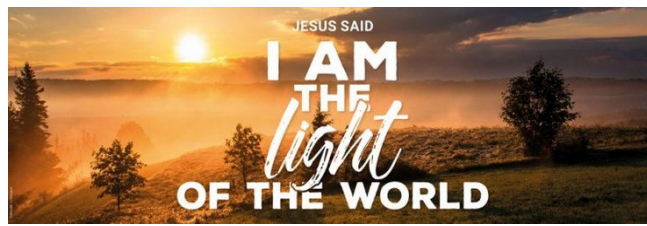
The part of the brain that filters all this information is called the Reticular Activating System. It's continually at work, even though we never think about it.

Today's story is about our spiritual Reticular Activating System. The goal for all of us, as followers of Jesus, is to see the same things that he sees. (Darryl Dash, Spiritual Eyesight)

We want to notice what's important to him.

When the disciples saw a man blind from birth, they asked Jesus what transgressions caused his blindness. They were convinced that many of the weaknesses that plagued this man were the result of human stupidity and sin.

FOR THE LORD
sees not
AS MAN SEES...
BUT THE LORD
looks on the
HEART.
1 SAMUEL 16:7



Jesus replied that God allowed blindness with a higher purpose, to show that he is the true source of power and that as long as he is in the world he is the light of the world, (9:5) sustaining life and overcoming the darkness of spiritual blindness.

When Jesus approached the blind man, he first awakened in him hope – the hope that God offers to those who seek his help. Jesus "spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes." (9:6) He instructed him to wash in the pool of Siloam, and the blind man regained his sight.

This was certainly more than just a miracle event. This was a "sign" pointing to God's power.

One of his biggest signs was the healing of the blind man, and, according to the Jewish leaders, Jesus committed a major sin.

The Pharisees were upset by the miracle of Jesus for three reasons: First, "he spat on the ground and made mud. The rabbis held that it was all right to spit on a rock on the Sabbath day because that would not make mud, but spitting on the dirt violated the Sabbath because that made mud -- and making mud is work, and work is forbidden on the Sabbath day! That is how ridiculous their regulations became.

Second, the rabbis said it was forbidden to heal on the Sabbath day. They specifically said, 'If you find somebody with a broken leg you can keep it from getting worse, but you cannot make it any better.'

The third thing Jesus did was to use spit. There is a specific instruction in the rabbinical literature that spit could not be used because spit is medicine. The use of medicine was forbidden on the Sabbath day because that, too, is a form of work.

So with these infinitely narrow, petty regulations they had surrounded the Sabbath day with such difficulty that one could hardly breathe without breaking the law. This was their excuse to reject Jesus." ("Believing is Seeing" by Ray Stedman, March 18, 1984, raystedman.org)

The prejudices of religious leaders blinded them to truly understand God's purpose for the Sabbath: to do good.

Jesus used blindness in a spiritual, metaphorical sense – of those who cannot see the light and truth of God, and how Jesus heals blind souls.

Blindness and sight are explicitly mentioned in twenty-four of the chapter's forty-one verses, including the first and last ones. The details of the miracle itself are repeated four times — that Jesus put mud on the eyes of the blind man and then he regained his sight. At the centre of the story is Jesus, the giver of sight and the very light of the world in which true sight becomes possible. (Meda Stamper, Ph.D, 2011, workingpreacher.org)

St. Augustine, in his commentary on this Gospel passage, reminds us that, "If we consider the significance of this miracle, we will see that humanity is the blind man." (adapted from "Jesus Heals the Blind Man," pilgrim - info.com)

What is also important to recognize in today's reading is the sense of hearing.

The blind man first hears Jesus, responding to his voice, his instruction to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man's sight returns gradually, both literally and figuratively, from seeing Jesus as "the man called Jesus" (9:11) to addressing him as "Lord" and worshipping him. (9:38)

Jesus himself references both hearing and seeing in verse 37: "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." (references from Commentary on John: 9:1-41 by Karoline Lewis, workingpreacher.com)

In the midst of our Lenten journey, God doesn't see us as everyone else sees us. People around us may see us as confident and successful, or shy and introverted, young or old.

It doesn't matter at all how others may see us.

God sees our hearts.

Perhaps we wish we had him fooled, like those we've led to believe that we're less frightened, more confident, happier than we really are.

Or perhaps we're deeply grateful that God sees through all the shallow, negative judgments which so many people have placed on us. Probably it's both.

God looks into our hearts and sees us as we really are.

In Lent, that's a call for introspection.

This is fundamentally a story about grace, and the blind man sums it up beautifully for all of us: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." (9:25)

Amen.

