



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Blind Spots”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

John 9

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I miss the days of being able to see things well. When I was chatting with Gail Perlick in the wake of her small stroke a bit over a week ago, she quoted her dad (as she had with me before) in saying that, ‘aging isn’t for sissies!’ I think we all know that to some degree or another, and my earliest experiences with that reality have been with my eyes. I was well into my 30’s before I needed glasses for anything, I was still using just readers into my 40’s, and today I have the progressive lenses with three different viewing fields and literally everything – near, far, and in-between – is a blur when the glasses come off.

The more intense experience I’ve noticed with my aging eyes, however, is a dramatic change in how quickly they adjust to sudden onset of bright lights. Pupils don’t dilate as quickly as we age and when I stumble out of bed in the morning and turn on the light in the bathroom, it’s almost painful at first. The light is striking to my awakening eyes. I squint... I rub... I blink... And I wait... as my eyes take their time in trying to adjust to that profound brightness I’ve encountered in that space. The one thing I have to do, however, is keep my eyes open. I have to keep looking. It may be disruptive at first – but my ability to see in the brightness of the day is wholly contingent on my enduring of that 12 seconds of discomfort as my eyes ever-more-slowly acclimate to their capacity to take it all in.

I say all of that, because I would argue that, in this encounter with Jesus in John 9, that man born blind is the only one who actually does that!

That dichotomy between darkness and light – between blindness and sight – is a rich and prominent theme in John’s gospel. And our attention in John 9 tends to focus on that primary character of this man, blind since birth, sitting on the side the road. There’s an intriguing detail here, in that this man, at least in John’s account of this event, really has nothing to do with initiating any of this. Unlike the story of Blind Bartimaeus in Matthew, Mark and Luke, crying out from the edge of the crowd for Jesus’ healing touch, this man in John’s story is just sitting there, and it’s the disciples who kick off this chain of events. It was a common theological construct of the time that physical maladies were a divine punishment for one’s misdeeds – so the disciples point to this guy huddled off to the side of the street begging for money and ask, ‘Who sinned? Was it him? Was it his parents? Whose fault is this?’ Jesus, of course, doesn’t subscribe to their understanding, he leads their thinking in a new direction, and ultimately heals this man who, still, had not as much as asked for a thing. This man continues to just be along

for the ride. It's then, however, as Jesus leads into that healing moment, that Jesus says, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

That's a poignant comment to make if we take the time to realize that, throughout the story, there is a litany of those who remain blind to the moment.

- It starts with those disciples – so stuck in their theological constructs and logical formulations that they see this man as one who somehow 'deserves' his trials, and not as the agent of God's glory that Jesus sees him to be.
- It continues with those neighbors who, upon that moment of his healing, can't even recognize that it's him. These people see that man every day. He's out there begging every day. And now that he's been healed they can't even see that it's him.
- There are the Pharisees, of course, who envision trickery, or falsehoods, or something else that must be going on, because there's no way this man who is doing such things on the sabbath could possibly be from God.
- The wider fellowship of the Jews in the area seem to have their own blindness to the moment, unable to see the wonder and glory of what is going on and, instead, calling out the parents to testify as to the identity of this man.
- And those parents? They do recognize their son, but they don't seem to grasp what has taken place. They don't rejoice with their son in his healing. They don't want to be involved at all, as they quickly punt the questions back to their son. 'He's a big boy – ask him!'

Throughout the first 34 verses of this story of Jesus healing this man's blindness, we are consistently introduced to a litany of those who fail to see. From preconceptions, to distractions, to power, to fear, to so many other sentiments at play, this story is filled with those who are unable to see, all while that blind man continues to battle, a little bit at a time, for that true gift of his sight.

Remember, at least to the extent of what John tells us here, this man didn't call out for this experience. His initial introduction to Jesus in this moment is as something of a prop in an object lesson that Jesus was trying to put forth to his disciples. Jesus flat out tells them that he's using this man's blindness to make a point. Now, that's not to detract from the gift this man receives or the glory that is revealed in it, but we are not starting from a point of faith here. In that other similar story in the synoptic gospels, Bartimaeus cries out through the crowd for healing – because he knows that Jesus can provide that to him. Bartimaeus may be blind, but he can see the promise that Jesus can offer to his life. That's not what we have here in John. And, even when his blindness is cured in an instant, this blind man in John remains a long way from seeing.

Slowly, however – one little squint at a time – this man begins to take in the Light of the World that is shining before him.

- It starts with the simple facts of what had happened. As his neighbors and the Pharisees ask how he can see, his first response is to tell the story: 'Some guy named Jesus rubbed mud on my eyes, told me to wash them, and here we are!'

- The more he tells the story, the more he begins to see that there's a bit more going on here. As the Pharisees press him on what happened his experience grows from a mere recounting to a greater understanding as he proclaims Jesus to be a prophet.
- As he's brought back another time for his testimony, his understanding grows to conviction as he names himself as a follower of Jesus and states unequivocally that Jesus must come from God.

Each step of the way the man is squinting, and blinking, and rubbing his eyes... trying to get some clarity in the face of this bright line suddenly shining into his life that seems to be completely overlooked by almost everyone around him. And then, as he is driven out by the Pharisees, Jesus reenters the story of this man's growing sight. We pick up the story where we had left off, now in the 35th verse of chapter 9:

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." 37 Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." 38 He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. 39 Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind." 40 Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

It's a fascinating moment – and a telling one at that. Finally, the man can see. All of his squinting and striving to acclimate to this bright light shining into his life is met with the presence of Jesus before him and his full-hearted trust and devotion to that glory and promise that he now perceives. I get this image of this man looking towards Jesus – staring directly at him with eyes wide open and that stunned sense of awe on his face, and then the camera pans to those Pharisees, overcome with dumbfounded confusion, who have a choice of their own to make – to turn their eyes and walk away towards the seeming comfort of the darkness, or to start their own journey of squinting, and blinking, and rubbing as they try to grasp what it is that Jesus is seeking to shine into their lives.

It is my ardent hope and prayer that most of us, at least in some aspect or another of our lives, can identify with that blind man truly able to see as he looks with awe and wonder towards the promises of God that he now understands in and through the ministry and person of Jesus, the Christ. I pray, truly, that we each know that sense in some way or another, in our lives, today.

I am all but certain, however, that we each can identify, in some aspect or another of our lives, with someone else in that story. Whether it's our worldly ambitions, our theological certitude, our experiential narrow-mindedness, our fear, or any of thousand other sensibilities at play, I am convinced that we are all, in some way or another, like those Pharisees standing beside the light of Jesus, failing to realize that we are the ones who have been blind all along. Somewhere, somehow, in our lives, Jesus is trying to get us to confront our blind spots, to battle through that momentary discomfort of adjusting to God's higher understanding, and to see more clearly what is evident in, and only in, the light that Jesus seeks to shine upon it. And we, like they, have a choice. We turn our eyes and walk away towards the seeming comfort of the darkness, or we

can start our own journey of squinting, and blinking, and rubbing as slowly, one day to the next, we strive to grasp what it is that Jesus is seeking to shine into our lives.