



**“Who Is Blind?”**  
**Scripture – John 9**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, March 26, 2017**

Here we have John the poet, not the historian, telling another story about Jesus. Tune your heart to his metaphors, because this gospel is laden with non-literal language.

When wine runs dry at a wedding, Jesus turns jars of water into the finest wine they have ever tasted. The fact that Jesus does not simply produce 12 bottles, but rather 150 *gallons*, is a tip-off that the gospel’s author is using wine as a symbol rather than a literal object.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, Nicodemus questions how he could re-enter his mother’s womb. Jesus smacks himself on the forehead. He is not talking about a second *physical* birth, but rather a *spiritual* rebirth.

When Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at the well and tells her about living water, she imagines a spring that flows continuously, but living water represents the life-giving Spirit of God.

If we read today’s passage literally, we reduce it to a tale about the healing power of Jesus. Certainly it is an inspiring story about the miraculous gifts Jesus possessed, but a distant story – one that has little to do with us and life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, if we awaken to the fact that blindness is being used in a more than literal sense, we are drawn into reflecting on how someone possessing perfect 20/20 vision can still be stumbling around in the dark.

Jesus and his disciples are walking along when they come upon a man who has been blind since birth. The disciples do not speak to the man. They do not ask him if there is anything they can do to help. Instead, they use him as an object to work out their theology. They ask Jesus, “Who sinned – this man or his parents – that he was born blind?”

Despite the Book of Job, many in the ancient world believed that suffering was the result of God’s punishment. If your crops failed or you broke your leg, it must be God punishing you for your sin. If your harvest was abundant and your health was robust, it must be God rewarding you for your virtue.

Jesus moves to quash their musing. “No one’s sin caused his blindness, but his plight could become an opportunity for God’s works to be revealed through him.”

Then, Jesus does what our mothers firmly instructed us never to do. He spits. He spits on the ground and uses his saliva to make the dirt into mud. He makes a couple of miniature mud pies, splats them on the man's eyes and then tells the man to go to the pool of Siloam to wash off the mud. The man does as he is told, and he acquires something he never had – vision.

It is at this point, the author of this story disappoints. A man had been blind his whole life and suddenly he can see, and the author fails to provide details of the man's reaction. I can picture this man with saucer-sized eyes leaping around shouting to anyone within earshot, "Look at that dazzling sky! Look at those gorgeous trees! Look at all the vivid colors. I can see!"

The man is able to see birds soaring above in a majestic sky that stretched to the horizon, able to see children running after each other, and able to look into the eyes of his mother and father. This man no longer needs someone to guide his steps; he can see the path for himself. He had always loved the sweet taste of grapes. Now, he is mesmerized by a vineyard that covers an entire hillside.

A man who had been blind since birth can now see. What a miracle! Someone should throw a celebration for the whole village.

However, the Pharisees squash any possibility of a party. They shout, "This is a catastrophe! Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath, a clear violation of section four, paragraph three: Do no work on the Sabbath!"

The religious leaders begin peppering the man with questions: "Who did this? How did he do it? What was this man doing working on the Sabbath? Has he no respect for the law?"

The man replies simply, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."

The Pharisees argue among themselves, then they demand that his parents be hauled in for questioning. The parents fear getting on the wrong side of the Pharisees who can banish them from the synagogue, so when questioned, they say, "He is an adult. Ask him."

The Pharisees drag the man back in and tell the man that Jesus is a sinner. The man replies, "All I know is that I was blind, and now I see."

Rather than rejoicing with the man; rather than saying, "Thanks be to God," the Pharisees are incensed. Why? Because *they* did not perform the miracle. They are more concerned about who gets the credit than the miracle itself.

Our passage intends to elicit a question from us: Who is really blind here? Is it the man who was physically blind or the Pharisees who are so concerned about being outshone that they are blind to who Jesus is?

Here is something that happens all too frequently at our house. I open the refrigerator door and look for something in particular – yogurt, cheese, whatever. I don't see it and ask Camilla if we are out of it.

She replies, "No, we're not out. It may not be directly in front of your eyes, but it's there."

I think to myself: No way. It's not here. I just scoured the shelves. All right, I'll look a second time. Oh, here it is. About that time, Camilla wanders into the kitchen, sees me with what I thought was lost, but now is found, and with a twinkle in her eye says, "Way to go! You found it!"

Sometimes I think I see everything in front of me, but then I take a second look, and with a slightly changed perspective, I see something that I had missed, but was there all the time. Does that ever happen to you?

What do you see and what do you miss? Where are you perceptive and where are you blind?

I have often been blind to my cultural privileges because I am a white, middle class male. I remember being surprised when a high school friend from a low income family had no expectation of going to college. I thought everyone went from high school to college. But, his father trampled his ambition, saying, “You think you’re smarter than I am, don’t you?”

I remember my surprise in learning that an African American high school that dominated in football and basketball had no swim team. The reason was that theirs was the only public school in town that did not have a pool.

I remember my eyes opening when I learned that women a few years older than I were led to believe that they had only four career opportunities: teacher, secretary, nurse and flight attendant.

I remember my eyes opening when I went to Israel and saw Palestinians needlessly hassled by soldiers at check points, their olive trees burned, their livelihood destroyed. Then, they are driven off the land their family has owned for generations and their homes are bulldozed to make way for more settlements.

We think of ourselves as informed and perceptive and it surprises us to discover that we can be blind to injustice until some person or new insight opens our eyes.

The Pharisees were driven by a need to control the situation and dictate the terms. Thus, they were blind to the miracle in their midst and the Messiah who could open the door to rich and abundant ways of living.

*The eyes through which we see create the world in which we live.* If our thoughts are clouded with suspicion and fear, we will observe a threatening and dangerous world. If our minds are infused with love and gratitude, we will perceive beauty and joy.

Jesus can restore your sight. The more you seek the way of Jesus – what he taught and how he lived – the clearer your vision becomes. The more you squint to see the image of God in others, the brighter your world becomes.

God wants us to envision the world as it can be. A place where broken relationships can be reconciled; where people seek not selfish interest, but the common good; where each of us wants for the other, the good things we want for ourselves; where cruelty is overwhelmed by compassion, and greed overrun by generosity where strangers become friends; and where dead ends become pathways for new possibilities.

Yesterday, I caught a glimpse of God’s kingdom on earth in our Meeting Room. Three Christians from Westminster and a few Jews from Congregation Beth Shalom threw a surprise birthday party for the mother of our Muslim refugee family. Not only was it a surprise because Maryam did not know we were going to celebrate her birthday, but because she had NEVER had a birthday party. Did you know they do not recognize birthdays in Afghanistan?

We had ice cream and a cake covered with candles. We had balloons, cards, presents and those cheesy cardboard party hats. You’ve never had a birthday party before? Well, welcome to the U.S.A!

Instead of barriers, there were bonds between the people from the three different faiths. And outstretched arms that said, “You are no longer strangers, you are our friends, and we want to help you get back on your feet.”

*The eyes through which we see create the world in which we live.* Will you let Jesus touch your eyes?

## Prayers of the People ~ Susan Moseley

God of generations past and generations yet to come, we gather as your people longing to understand more fully and see more clearly the shape of your wisdom. Our weeks are full of activity and stress. In the challenges and difficulties of our lives keep us persistent in our search for your guidance, and confident of your grace and mercy.

O God, the noise of politics is everywhere. Fear and anger feed the demons of distrust. Spirit of Life, what has gone so wrong that we seem constantly at odds with one another, with the creation, and with you? We have more blind spots than we care to admit. So we pray...

Where we have been stubborn or proud,  
...wash the arrogance from our lives.

Where we have closed our eyes to suffering and preferred ignorance,  
...wash away our false piety.

Where we have been lazy in learning and cheap on compassion,  
...wash away our excuses.

O Christ, we want to see clearly. We want to behold your face as for the first time and feel your love and know again that in you and through you we have the power to change things...to change ourselves.

...that where there is division and fear, we can be reconcilers.

Where there is poverty and crushing injustice, we can stand with the vulnerable.

Where there is despair and only darkness, we can be a light of hope for a better tomorrow.

God of pilgrims and refugees, we pray for people who are separated from their homeland, from families, friends or communities of faith. Particularly we pray for the young family that traveled to us all the way from Afghanistan. Help them know they are honored and valued and protected. May the new people they meet become friends and may this strange new land become a safe home.

O Lord, look upon your planet earth: Help us to know that we are all your children, that all nations belong to one great family, and all religions of justice and love lead to you. Multiply our prayers in every land until the whole earth becomes your congregation united in your love. Sustain our vision of a peaceful future and give us strength to work unceasingly to make that vision real.

For this, we pray in your name and continue to pray as you taught us, saying...

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”