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"Blindness"

I Samuel 16:1—13 John 9:1-41 Ephesians 5:8-14

INTRODUCTION TO I SAMUEL 16:1-13

In our passage from Samuel God has sent him to look for a person to succeed Saul as King. The criteria for finding a successor however was not based on outward appearance, but on what's on the inside. Hear the word of the Lord from I Samuel 16:1-13

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 9:1-41

Two Sundays ago we looked at Nicodemus, a man who could see but was afraid to be seen with Jesus. Last week we looked at a woman who went to the well at noon when no one else would because she didn't want to be seen by anybody. This week we look at a man who couldn't see anything. This blind man didn't come to Jesus. Jesus' disciples pointed him out, not so that he could be healed, no one born blind had ever been healed before. They pointed him out as way of instigating a theological discussion. .

There is physical blindness, and there is another, even more tragic form of blindness-spiritual blindness. Both forms of blindness are present in today's gospel reading. Hear the gospel of our Lord from John 9:1-41.

Let us pray. We, who were sometimes in darkness, now are we in light in the Lord. Open our eyes Lord to see your grace and mercy at work in this man's life and in ours. Help us to see ourselves more clearly and the role you have for us to play in the lives of others as we witness to what you have done and are doing in our lives. In Jesus Name we pray, Amen.

There's a story about an encounter between this man who was healed by Jesus by making a mud pie and putting it on his eyes and another man that Jesus healed by just spitting on the man's eyes. The one with just spit took a second try but after seeing men like walking trees Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes and he could see clearly. One day the two formerly blind men met and eventually got into an argument. The one with the mud pack said, "You gotta have mud." The other said, "No, you only need spit." Each one insisting on his own way they left the encounter and formed the first two denominations, the Mudies and the Spitities.

When faced with the reality of a personal tragedy that had no simple explanation like a man born blind, the disciples looked for a reason. In keeping with one of the popular theological views of their day, the disciples wondered if this blindness was a punishment from God for some terrible sin. Of course if the man was born blind it couldn't have been something he did, so they wondered if it might have been a sin committed by his parents that brought about the poor man's condition.

Jesus' answer only added to the disciples' confusion, and does nothing for us either. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Sometimes pain, sometimes agony of the body and the spirit, sometimes the cross of suffering is only the preparation for some greater good, some greater glory, something to help us better understand the kingdom of God.

The troubling and troublesome "why" questions of life sometimes just don't have any satisfactory answers. At the end of the day, some will accept in faith that one day all things will come to light and truth and perfect understanding will be theirs. Others may turn away in doubt and disillusionment and ultimately in disbelief.

The disciples' question, "Who sinned, that this man was born blind?" is just another way of asking, "If God exists, why is there so much hurting and suffering in the world? Why does a good person die at a relatively young age? Why does an older person sometimes have to endure days and weeks and months of agony before they find release from their suffering? Why are there natural disasters, like hurricanes and earthquakes and floods and tsunamis and mudslides that cause death and destruction and disrupt people's lives for many months afterward? Why do good people get malignant tumors and heart disease and Alzheimer's disease and die in automobile accidents?"

Job, in one of the most ancient of all biblical writings, screamed his "WHY?" to God through clenched teeth in the midst of personal disaster. One answer some have offered is that our personal and universal calamities are expressions of God's displeasure with our world or with our actions. That was the answer Job's "friends" gave him. They said, "It's not hard to figure out, Job. You must have done something that made God angry. You said something, or did something, or maybe even just thought something that God didn't like, and this is what you get for it!"

Job didn't care much for that answer, and neither do I. Although the Old Testament writers did speak often of God in terms of anger and discipline, they ALSO continually praised God's mercy, love and kindness.

How often did the prophets urge the people to choose whom they would serve? God's love and justice require the restraint of power in order that we may be free to decide for ourselves between good and evil, between loving God and rejecting God. God chooses NOT to be all-powerful in relationships with us because God does not want puppets or programmed clones. God wants willing followers.

Unfortunately, many have been deluded into believing that being a Christian should automatically make us immune to the temptations and the consequences of giving in to them. God never promised us a carefree, painless existence. The

problems and puzzles of life, the unfairness, and the pain are things that we have to work through and think about and pray about if we are to be truly human. Indeed, Jesus promised his followers that as long as they were in the world would have tribulation. But he charged them to be of good cheer for he had overcome the world.

The cold hard facts are that we live in a world of trouble and sickness and disease and among people who thirst for power over other people. These things come not from God but from human perversion and greed and rebellion against God.

Jesus chose to confront the troubles of this world, to bear the pain and the burden, to take them to the cross of Calvary, to redeem and to save us from ourselves. And in doing that, Jesus sometimes broke the rules.

When Jesus met the blind man he decided this was a day to break the rules. It was the Sabbath day. The disciples pointed out this blind man and with a little spit and dirt and a loving touch, Jesus restored the man's sight.

You would think that the people of faith would rejoice and celebrate this miracle performed in their very midst, right? But it was not so. A theological debate breaks out about why Jesus shouldn't heal a man born blind because it was on the Sabbath and you weren't supposed to do work on the Sabbath. They mount an investigation. They call in the blind man's parents as witnesses. They call the blind man in as a witness. And the man replies, "Look, I really don't know how to answer you. All I know for sure is that I was blind until Jesus came along, and now I see."

There is much irony in the story of the healing of the man born blind. The one who was born blind learns to walk in the light, while those who were gifted with normal sight choose to live and remain in darkness because of their spiritual blindness.

When we consider our own calling to "walk as children of light," it's easy to recognize which character in the story we ought to imitate. Like the man born blind, we too have been restored by our encounter with Jesus. We too have been saved by God's free grace, and our eyes have been opened to see the world in a new, counter-cultural way. The challenge before us is how do we respond to this miracle in a faithful manner, whatever the risk might be?

When I was 19, I took a summer job at the Lighthouse for the Blind. I taught music and drama to about a 20-30 children from ages 6 to 15. Some of them had been born blind. Some of them had varying degrees of limited sight. Some had very thick glasses. Some wore sunglasses.

When I started working with the physically blind at the Lighthouse I was physically sighted, but spiritually blind. I knew about Jesus, but I didn't know Jesus. *I enjoyed working with them. We loved singing together and doing skits. I loved taking them on field trips. I took them bowling. We went to Galveston. (I wore my glasses in the Gulf so I could keep track of them, but I got hit by a wave and lost my glasses—it was a case of the blind leading the blind. I'm glad I wasn't driving the bus home) I even took them to a Disney movie starring a teenage Kirk Russell called Now You See Him, Now You Don't. It was about a teenager who invented a formula that allowed him to be invisible. We sat on the front row and I described the movie as it went along.*

That was a pivotal summer for me. Through working with those precious children my spiritual eyes were opened. I once could see, but I was blind, but then I could really see! Hebrews 12:1 says Faith is assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things....not seen. Through faith I discovered what I had long hoped for and became convinced of what I could never have seen with the naked eye.

I believe that God expects us to ask "why" sometimes. But I also believe that in order to see the answer (when there is one) we need spiritual sight to overcome our spiritual blindness.

As our youth shared with us this morning we need this spiritual sight to first notice the Influences around us and be aware and attuned to which ones are good and which ones are bad. We need the insight as to why those influences are trying to lead us astray or to follow those that will lead us to do God's will. We need to understand the impact that those influences can have on our lives for the better and we need to ourselves seek to be a good influence in others and ignite that spark for others.

Let us pray to seek God's influence as we live out our relationships, as we do our daily work, as we care for those entrusted to us. Let us pray for God's insight to show us the world beyond our own immediate needs and to know what forces are trying to influence us one way or another. . Let us pray that God will impact us and open our eyes that we may see others as they truly are, and that we may see ourselves, not only as we are, but as we may yet, by the grace of God, become. Then we will be a part of igniting sparks that will help us live out our calling to be the light of the world Jesus challenged us to be.

When moments of spiritual blindness come in your life, as they almost certainly will; when doubt causes you to fear; when sorrow shakes the very core of your belief in God; when scoffers embarrass you and mock you; remember the words of the man born blind: "All I know is, I was blind, and then I met Jesus. And now I can see." Not everyone will be healed of physical blindness, but through Jesus all can be cured of spiritual ... blindness.

Let's pray. Forgiving God, in a world filled with so much pain, we would rather shut our eyes and be blind than see things as they really are. Grant us the courage to face the reality of our world, and give us the strength to bring your light to those who walk in darkness. Help us see others as you see them, and forgive us when we do not trust you enough to open our eyes to the possibilities before us. Heal our self-inflicted blindness, O God, and lead us in the footsteps of the Light of the World,

who reveals your glory in his life, his teachings, and his love. Gracious God, we are grateful for all that you have done for us, for all that you are doing in us, and for all that you will do through us. Open our eyes to see your presence among us, moving in powerful ways at all times and in all places. Open our ears to hear familiar words in new ways—ways that will change us and challenge us to become the people you created us to be. Grant us the power and the courage to come out of the darkness and into the light of Jesus Christ that we may serve you by serving others. Hear us as we lift to you others that are on our hearts this morning.