

## Called to Light

Sarah Johnson – Ottawa Mennonite Church – April 3, 2011

Fourth Sunday of Lent: Called and Shaped by Jesus

Psalm 23, John 9:1-41

“Surely *we* are not blind...*are we*?” The story of the man born blind in John is as much about the blindness of the seeing, as it is about recovery of sight to the blind. It is a story about spiritual insight, more than physical ability.

### An uncomfortable metaphor

Before I go any further, I want to admit I am uncomfortable with the blindness metaphor in this story and this sermon. I do not want to subtly reinforce prejudice against people who are visually impaired. I do not want to equate physical blindness with sin or a lack of spiritual discernment. A person can be physically blind and have 20/20 spiritual vision. A person can have perfect 20/20 vision and be spiritually unable to see a thing. If eye sight is in any way related to spiritual aptitude, I suggest we stop right now, hold a congregational meeting, and elect new deacons and two new pastors because, when I looked around the ministerial table on Tuesday night, there were *a lot* of glasses. Despite my discomfort with this metaphor, it is unavoidable in this gospel text: words for blindness, sight and seeing appear 24 times in these 41 verses.

### A blind man has his vision adjusted

John 9 tells the story of a man whose eyes are continually being opened. The healing of his physical blindness is only the beginning of his journey to spiritual insight. I imagine him in the optometrists’ office:

“It’s a miracle!” the optometrist exclaims, “You can see again! Now...we just need to focus your vision a little bit more. Look at the man who healed you... who do you see?”

The formerly blind man replies, “This is the man who made mud and spread it on my eyes and told me to wash it off.”

“Hmmm....” muses the optometrist, clicking through lenses, “Clearer or blurrier?”

“Clearer,” replies the man.

“Prophet or sinner?” asks the optometrist.

The man blinks, “Um....prophet?”

“Okay then,” the optometrist slides and flips through lenses, “1.....2....or 3?”

“3,” the man decides. As the edges of the man’s vision sharpen, Jesus comes into clearer view: “This man is from God!” he exclaims, “If he has opened my eyes he must listen to God and do God’s will.”

Smiling, the optometrist continues gently guiding him to sight, “And let’s just try one more....better or worse?”

As the final adjustment is made, the seeing man whispers in stunned awe: “I believe! He is the Son of Man! The one we have been waiting for!”

The man born blind *gradually* recognizes Jesus identity. It does not happen the instant he is healed, but develops over time. His vision is gradually adjusted.

### Lent

Most of us have impaired vision when it comes to God, the world and ourselves. We are sitting in the chair of God, the Great Optometrist. As the Spirit slides different lenses in front of our eyes and our vision becomes clearer and blurrier then clearer again.

During the season of Lent, we pray that God will be our Optometrist, that God will adjust our vision. We look at Christ and the world and ourselves through different lenses—different experiences, questions, worldviews, and stories. Some lenses reveal details we have never before noticed, others make us blink back tears, some barely make a difference.

Often, our vision must become blurrier before it can become clearer. TS Elliot wrote: "*In order to arrive at what you do not know you must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.*" These words hang on the wall in my mother's office at the university as a reminder to herself and her students that when studying or doing research we need to admit what we don't know and what we can't do if we are going to learn new things and develop new skills. The same is true with faith. We need to notice the blurry edges of our faith in order to bring them into sharper perspective. We need to acknowledge the shadowy corners of our lives in order to shine light into those places. Confession is one way God adjusts our vision during the season of Lent. Seeing our own stories through the stories of Scripture is another.

### **The disciples and Pharisees go to the Optometrist**

The disciples and the Pharisees we encounter in the gospel of John also struggle with seeing Jesus, the world and themselves clearly. The lenses they use obscure their vision.

#### **The first lens: Who is to blame?**

At first, the disciples vision is obscured by seeing the world through the question of blame: "Who has sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Whose fault is it? We too are so eager to see the world through the lens of blame.

You're doing dishes in the kitchen when a ball flies through the window with a crash. Picking your way through the broken glass, you peer through the hole and see two boys, frozen in horror. One holds a hockey stick; the other wears a goalie pads. They are both speechless for exactly five seconds, and then each begins to shout, pointing at the other: "I told you not to set up the net there!" "What?! You're the one who said the sun was in your eyes!" "But I didn't take the shot!" "You didn't stop it! And it was your idea to play in the first place!" As their voices rise you realize they are waiting for you to decide: Whose fault is it, that the ball went through the window?

A couple sits in the doctor's office, waiting for her report. They have been given the diagnosis; now, they want to know why she's sick. Is it her genetics? His smoking? The pollution from the factory? The doctor opens the folder in front of her and takes a deep breath. The question hangs heavy in the air: Whose fault is her illness?

You open the newspaper. Attack ads dominate an election campaign. Nuclear crisis continues in Japan. Political unrest sweeps across the Middle East. Ottawa bus routes are changing. The Senators did not play well this season. No matter what the story, the same question dominates the discussion: Whose fault is it?<sup>1</sup>

#### **A different lens: How is God at work?**

Perhaps it is human instinct to find fault, and especially to ensure that blame does not cling to us. Perhaps naming blame is as an important step in addressing the problem, or at least reconciling the problem with our world view.

"Who has sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" In the context of first century Jewish theology this is a reasonable question. Illness was often viewed as a consequence of sin. It was commonly thought that parents' sins could be visited on their children.<sup>2</sup> Yet Jesus rejects the question of blame: "No one sinned. This man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." This is no one's fault. It is an opportunity for God to be seen and known. Jesus gives us a new question, a new lens: How is God at work? Whose fault is the broken window? No one's fault. But, given the situation, what might God be doing here? Whose fault is her sickness? No one's fault. But, since this is the case, what might God do in this situation? Whose fault is bad news: the unrest and fear and trouble of the world? No one's fault. But, amidst the shadows, what might God do now? How is God at work?

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Anna Carter Florence for the central insight and one of the examples in this portion of the reflection.

<http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=28>

<sup>2</sup> New Interpreters Bible.

How is our vision being adjusted so we can see the world, not through the lens of blame, but through the lens of God's activity?

### **The second lens: Follow the rules**

Later on in the story, we learn about one way the vision of the Pharisees is obscured. Some Pharisees make an accusation: "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." Jesus broke the Sabbath by mixing dirt and spit, which was considered kneading, an activity explicitly forbidden on the day of rest.<sup>3</sup> Another group of Pharisees counters the first group: "But....how can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" Using only the lens of the rules, the Pharisees argue amongst themselves. They cannot reconcile Jesus healing – a sign of closeness to God, with Jesus breaking the Sabbath – a sign of distance from God. Jesus just does not fit within the established guidelines! Exasperated, the man who was blind finally breaks into the argument: "I don't know if this man is a sinner. *What I do know is this: I was blind and now I see!*"

### **A different lens: Join God's work**

The Pharisees vision is so focused on following the rules (and ensuring the rules are followed by others) that they are unable to join in God's work of healing and hope (or attend to where it is being done by others).

I want to be clear. Sometimes joining God's work involves following the rules. Following rules can be life-giving and liberating. However, sometimes joining God's work involves breaking the rules. Jesus broke rules regarding the Sabbath in this instance and in the gospel of Mark where he also offers an explanation: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath."<sup>4</sup>

At other times, joining God's work may involve changing the rules. I am sure many of you are familiar with the story behind the hymn "Amazing Grace." Wayward sailor John Newton has conversion experience on the stormy sea. Newton returns to Christian faith, writes most well-known English language hymn, and works to abolish slavery in the British Empire. The quintessential conversion experience, right? Few realize that this process took more than four decades. Newton himself wrote of his experience in the storm: "I cannot consider myself to have been a believer in the full sense of the word, until a considerable time afterwards."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps that storm opened Newton's eyes, yet the Great Optometrist was at work on them for many more years before Newton had a clear vision for participating in God's work by changing the rules regarding slavery. Like the man born blind, Newton's eyes were opened gradually and his relationship to the rules followed suit.

How is our vision being adjusted so we can join with God's work, whether it means following, breaking, or changing the rules we live by?

### **The third lens: The need to be right**

Near the end of the story, the vision of the Pharisees is obscured in a different way. They are so focused on being right, on reinforcing their preconceived notions, that they are unable to hear the teaching of the healed man: "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They respond to his words with mocking questions: "You are trying to teach us? You a sinner?" While they first rejected his blindness as a way of dismissing the miracle, they now accept his blindness as a way of dismissing his teaching (based on the traditional linking of sin and illness). The Pharisees are so concerned with being right that they are unable to be teachable, to be vulnerable.

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<sup>3</sup> New Interpreters Bible.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 2:27.

<sup>5</sup> John Newton. *Out of the Depths*. Kregel, 2003. 84

### **A different lens: Vulnerability as strength**

We don't have to be right all the time for God's work to be revealed in us. We don't have to be physically healed for God's work to be revealed in us. If a healing happens, it may be the work of God. If a healing does not happen, the courage to live with a chronic condition may be the work of God.<sup>6</sup> In sickness and in health, in strength and in weakness, we seek to make God's work manifest in our lives. When reflecting on his own ailments, Paul writes that "Christ's power is made perfect in weakness."<sup>7</sup> The New Testament gives us a lens through which we can see our vulnerability as potential rather than liability.

We are currently taking to heart a scripture text in which God becomes vulnerable in Christ: "Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."<sup>8</sup> God's vulnerability in the humanity Christ created the possibility of something new, a new type of relationship with God as friend, and teacher, and guide in human form. God's work is revealed in Jesus' vulnerability.

When I was thirteen, I saw one of my favourite contemporary works of art for the first time. "The Snail" by Henri Matisse is a massive canvas, nearly three metres square. It is a loose spiral of large, brightly coloured blocks of paper attached to a white background. A rough orange border surrounds the spiral. Matisse created "The Snail" the year before he died. Confined to his bed or wheel chair and no longer able to paint, he was forced to develop a new technique of cutting and tearing paper and directing an assistant in placing it precisely on a canvas. His physical limitations prompted him to return to the basics of colour and line, to push the boundaries of art, to inspire my thirteen year old self and many others.<sup>9</sup> God's work is revealed in Matisse's vulnerability.

There is a restaurant in Montreal and Toronto called O.Noir where guests are invited to eat and drink and converse in the dark—no flashlights, no candles, no cell phones, no illuminated watches allowed. The entire wait staff at O.Noir is blind. The idea of dining in the dark originated with a blind pastor from Zurich Jorge Spielmann who used to blindfold his dinner guests so they could share his eating experience. He opened this first dark restaurant in Germany in 1999 with the aim of teaching the sighted about the sightless world and providing jobs for people who are visually impaired. God's work is revealed in Spielmann's vulnerability.<sup>10</sup>

How is our vision being adjusted so places vulnerability in our lives can be places where God's work is revealed?

### **God the Great Optometrist**

In John chapter 9 we test our three different lenses the Great Optometrist may be using to adjust our vision: the question of who to blame is switched out for the question of how God is at work; a simplistic adherence to the rules is replaced with creative commitment to joining God's work; the need to be right is exchanged for a vision of vulnerability as potential to reveal God's work.

Having our vision adjusted is not always a pleasant experience. Personally, I would much rather go to the dentist than the optometrist. Sometimes having our eyes opened takes us to the valley of shadows, to the fearful, or despairing, or apathetic places in our lives or the lives of others. Yet sometimes it also opens us to the green pastures and the quiet waters, to moments of joy or peace or surrender. Wherever we are, wherever we go, we hope and pray that God is our constant companion, our gentle guide, the Great Optometrist who opens our eyes and our hearts.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Stoffregen. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john9x1.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:9

<sup>8</sup> Philipians 2:5-7

<sup>9</sup> Henri Matisse. "The Snail." 1953. <http://www.tate.org.uk/imap/pages/animated/cutout/matisse/snail.htm>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.onoir.com/>