

## Wesley United Methodist Church

March 26, 2017

"I Once was Blind...and Maybe I Still Am."

John 9:1-41

A missionary named Roland Allen told a story about an older missionary who told about being a medical missionary in India for many years. He served in a region where there was an environmental condition that was causing progressive blindness in many people of that region. People were born with healthy vision, but there was something that caused people to lose their sight as they grew older.

As time went on, this medical missionary developed a treatment which could stop this progressive blindness. So, people came to him and he performed his treatment and people were no longer blind. Because of him their sight had been saved. The missionary noted that they never said, "Thank you," because that phrase was not in their dialect. Instead, they spoke a word that meant, "I will tell your name." Wherever they went, they would tell the name of the person who had cured their blindness. They had received something so wonderful that they eagerly told others.

Our story from John's Gospel is about a man who was also healed of blindness and who also eagerly told others what had happened to him. Jesus and his disciples came upon a man who had been blind from birth. The disciples asked Jesus who had sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind. As bad as this theology may seem to us, it was the accepted way of looking at things in Biblical times. Physical defects were seen as being the direct result of somebody's sin. Besides, in Exodus 34:5-7 God says to Moses when they were on Mt. Sinai, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

Jesus immediately put this idea to rest. "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame," he said, "look instead for what God can do." Jesus spits on the ground, makes some mud with the saliva, and puts it on the man's eyes. Then Jesus tells the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does what Jesus tells him and when he returns, he can see.

The neighbors of this man are surprised what has happened to him. They take him to show him to the Pharisees. Instead of being happy for the man and what happened to him, they are offended that Jesus has healed him on the Sabbath. They are not happy and try to discredit Jesus' miraculous healing. At first, they dispute that the man was ever blind in the first place. When the man's parents testify that he had indeed been born blind and now could see, the Pharisees had a dilemma. In their eyes, Jesus was a sinner because he didn't keep the Sabbath. God certainly would not honor the prayers of a sinner. And yet, here this man stood in front of them who had been given his sight. The man who had been healed says to the Pharisees, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see."

Have you ever noticed that when people get on the defensive, they get huffy? That's how the Pharisees become when confronted with this man. Like good lawyers, they begin tearing down the testimonies of the witness. They accuse him of being a disciple of Jesus and begin to insult him. It is interesting that this formerly blind man recognizes a reality that the Pharisees cannot. He begins to taunt them: "Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" The Pharisees respond the way people always respond when they are losing an argument. They toss him out with a final putdown. "You're nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!" This poor man was God's object lesson to the Pharisees, but they could not see what was right in front of them.

Jesus heard the man being thrown out by the Pharisees. He found him and asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him." The response from Jesus was, "You're looking right at him. Don't you recognize my voice?" "Master, I believe," the man said and worshiped him.

Jesus spoke some most interesting words, "I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind."

Our story, then is not really about physical blindness but about spiritual blindness—a disease that afflicted many of the Pharisees and afflicts many sincere people even today. It's easy to condemn the Pharisees but that would be a mistake. Contrary to popular belief, the Pharisees were the progressive party among Orthodox Jews. Their teachings were closer to many of the teachings of Jesus than were those of the Sadducees. They were brave and patriotic men who were determined to maintain the distinctiveness as Jews when foreign conquerors attempted to compromise the Jewish faith and wreck it by introducing their own customs and worship. The Pharisees lived in strict accord with the sacred writings as well as the oral tradition of their faith. For the most part, they were good, solid, respectable people

trying to live out their faith in a culture that was being corrupted by pagan thought and culture. This, however, produced a kind of spiritual blindness. We call it Myopia. They saw only what agreed with their faith. To everything else, they were blind. I can think of many Christians today who suffer from spiritual myopia. They think they are living according to the will and way of Christ. And yet they are blind in so many ways to real discipleship.

The Pharisees lived by the letter of the law, but they were blind to the spirit of the law. A good example was their attitude toward the Sabbath. They were so afraid of working on the Sabbath that there was a law stating if a person fractured a bone, they could not have it attended to on the Sabbath. Then there was the famous law that a woman dare not look into a mirror on the Sabbath for she might see a gray hair and be tempted to pluck it out. That would be working on the Sabbath.

Here is the point you and I need to see. Many people in our community see our church as a burden—not as a benefit. We need to be very careful within the body of Christ to let people see the joy, the love and the fellowship that are part of Christian community. We need to get the message out that we're not looking for persons to share our burden. We are here to share their burden. The fellowship of the church is a wonderful thing. We have a good time when we are together. Being part of the church should brighten people's lives, not take away from their joy. People who serve Christ together tend to have a great time doing it. We need to let the world know that their load can be lightened not increased when they become part of this fellowship.

The Pharisees used religion to divide people rather than to draw them together. Here again, we have to be very careful that we don't make the same mistake. There are many people in our community who somehow have the idea that they are not good enough to come inside these walls. One little girl said her favorite hymn was, "Just as I am without one flea..." We need to get the word out that we take people "fleas" and all. We dare not have the world see us as an exclusive community reserved only for saints. The very word "religion" means "to bind together." We are outside of the will of God when we allow our faith to erect walls. Christian faith does not erect walls, but bridges.

The sad thing about the Pharisees is that they cared more about their principles than they did about people. That is why it was easy for them to let an innocent man die on a cross. Of course, we know that Jesus wasn't the only victim of excessive religious zeal. Many people have been put to death in the name of religion. We know that it is never right to kill in the name of God. And it is equally true that it is possible to be fanatically devoted to the Christian religion and be totally blind to the will of God. That is the message for today. Christ came in the world to save people! Everything else in our religious beliefs is secondary to that truth.

Christ came into the world that we may see the greatness of God's love—for you, for me, and for every person on this globe. The Pharisees asked, "And are we blind, too?" The answer is, yes, absolutely, if you cannot see that the whole purpose of religion is to connect people with one another and with God. How about us? Are we among the vision impaired? If so, why not allow Jesus to heal our eyes today?