

Through Opened Eyes

Third in a 4-part series *Encounters with Jesus*

from the pulpit of
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John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.”

¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.” ¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” ²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from

God, he could do nothing.”³⁴ They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵ 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 near 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.

I learned a long time ago, from a man named Louis Watts, that people who are blind have a special kind of vision. Mr. Watts was a member of my family’s church in Richmond and the grandfather of my best friend. He was an engineer blinded as a young adult in a dynamite accident when he was building a tunnel through a mountain for a railroad. Even as a child I knew that Mr. Watts could see things that most seeing people could not see. His vocation had shifted from engineering to building a more accessible world for the blind. He was elected to the Virginia State Legislature, and lobbied to separate the state home for the blind and the deaf into two separate schools. He could see that blind children and deaf children have very different learning needs. At the time there was no one in Virginia trained to teach blind children, so he recruited a young teacher from Michigan to come to Virginia to teach. She later became Mrs. Watts.

I spent countless hours with my best friend Jean McLarin at her grandparents’ home and saw how Mr. Watts had a special way of seeing. I learned how to play the card game, Rook, with cards identified by Braille the top right corner of each card. It was during my early childhood that the movie *The Miracle Worker* came out with Patty Duke

playing young Helen Keller and Anne Bancroft her patient teacher, Anne Sullivan. Mr. Watts was a friend of Helen Keller which made a huge impression on me as a child. Mrs. Watts used to tell the story of going to Helen Keller's home for dinner for the first time one evening. They knocked, opened the door, and Mr. Watts went straight in to his friend, but Mrs. Watts had to stand in the doorway until someone turned on the lights so that she could see.

My admiration for Mr. Watts was part of my early lessons about stewardship too. When my parents taught me about tithing, of giving ten percent of my allowance away, I was told half of my tithe would go to the church, and I could choose where to give the other half of my ten percent. For many years I gave it to the Virginia Association of the Workers for the Blind, founded by Mr. Watts to help blind people learn a trade and have good work to do. I still have the little pin that recognizes me as a member. I treasure these early memories of my friendship with Mr. Watts because through them I came to realize that the blind do have a special way of seeing, a heightened sense that enables them to see what others so often do not even notice.

As we move through the gospel of John, from Nicodemus to the Woman at the Well to today's encounter with the man born blind, you may be noticing that the crowd involved in the sequence of these conversations is getting bigger, and the tension is mounting. Today, Jesus announces that he is the Light of the World, and the only one who sees Jesus for who he really is – is the blind man! In John's gospel there is something about the nature of light itself at play here. When light strikes something, it casts a shadow. When light is far away a shadow is very faint, but when light comes up close, the shadow can be very dramatic.

In Jesus, the Light of the World comes up close, and it casts a very dramatic shadow over this text. You would think that when Jesus healed this person, blind from birth, it would have been met with great rejoicing. For the first time, this human being can see his reflection in a

pool of water, he can see his parents and neighbors, can see olive branches waving in the wind, can see sheep being herded over the hillside, can see little children running down the road. You would think a party might be in store, a celebration of neighbors, friends, and family, but instead the miracle results in unbelievable confusion.

First, there is confusion voiced about the relationship between sin and suffering, because there was an ancient belief going back to the Book of Exodus that illness was the result of sin. Jesus' healing here overturns that old belief that sin is the cause of suffering. It is not – according to Jesus.

Secondly, there is confusion about Sabbath observance, about what counts as work and what would be considered the worship of God. When the neighbors argue over whether this man is really the same person who has been healed; they call in the religious authorities who become irritated that this healing happened on the Sabbath. You know, for some people following the rules is always the most important thing - here among the religious leaders, even more important than this unexpected miracle and act of faith. Rules can often get in the way of compassion and grace.

Third, there is confusion about belonging, about who is in and who is out. The man's parents become confused. When asked to verify that this man is their son, they are fearful before the Pharisees; they plead the Fifth, and ask them to question their son for themselves. "He is of age, ask him," they say. You see, his parents could be kicked out of the synagogue for claiming Jesus performed a miracle on the Sabbath, which would be asserting that he not only broke the rules, he acted like God who alone could bring sight to the blind.

When Jesus acts in the lives of hurting people, the Light of God shines forth creating shadows of confusion, and being faithful to Jesus Christ can put you at odds with the ways of the world. Suddenly old assumptions are called into question. Jesus says the old notions about the

relationship between sin and illnesses are not as simple as cause and effect; the tragedies of life are not so easily explained away. Suddenly long cherished rituals, like what we can and cannot do on the day we set apart to worship God, are challenged. When religious ritual subverts the goodness of God, it corrupts worship and, in fact, denies the power of God.

When Jesus walks into your life, suddenly, the blessing of vision and the perception of light can put a person in considerable risk. This particular miracle comes in an earthy, rather mundane way – by mixing spit with dirt and smearing that paste on the man’s eyes. But the real miracle is Jesus, standing with the blind man and revealing the true nature of a compassionate God. He reaches out, heals the man, and declares it a work of God. Through the person of Jesus Christ, God is doing a new thing in the eyes of the man born blind that the world might come to his Light. Through Christ God is doing a new thing in the lives of each of us, enabling us to see that we ourselves are being touched by God through him. We can no longer pretend we do not see people around us in pain and feeling alienated. We can no longer pass judgment on others that is void of compassion. We can no longer decide for ourselves who is in, and who is out in the realm of God.

Blinded and also rendered deaf from infancy, in her case by scarlet fever, Helen Keller wrote eloquently about her amazing gift of sight: “I, who cannot see, find hundreds of things to interest me through mere touch. I feel the delicate symmetry of a leaf. I pass my hands lovingly about the smooth skin of a silver birch, or the rough shaggy bark of a pine... I feel the delightful, velvety texture of a flower and discover its remarkable convolutions; and something of the miracle of Nature is revealed in me. Occasionally, if I am very fortunate, I place my hand gently on a small tree and feel the happy quiver of a bird in full song. At times my heart cries out with longing to see these things. If I can get so much pleasure from mere touch, how much more beauty must be revealed by sight. Yet, those who have eyes apparently see little. The panorama of color and action which fills the world is taken for granted.”

She concludes, “It is... a great pity that, in a world of light, the gift of sight is used only as a mere convenience rather than as a means of adding fullness to life.”¹

Friends, Jesus came as Light in a world of darkness, and he broke all the old, oppressive rules that blinded people from the good and gracious purposes of God. Here the man born blind is put on trial by his neighbors, questioned by the religious authorities, dismissed by his family, and cast out of the synagogue and community, and yet through all of the confusion we discover that he sees what no one else is able to see. He sees in Jesus Christ the compassionate, inclusive, rule-breaking love and power of God. And at great risk, by bucking the system and being willing to leave his old familiar ways, he tells the truth about it and in so doing, he loses his family, his neighbors, and his religious community. On the account of coming to faith, he experiences first hand the kind of shadows that the Light of Christ casts upon commonly held assumptions and empty religious practices.

There is a wonderful image in the last Harry Potter book: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, about the power of seeing in a new kind of light. Harry is attending the wedding of two dear friends, Bill and Fleur. Fleur is so beautiful – magically beautiful – that usually her beauty eclipses everyone else around her. Men are rendered speechless; women are envious. But on her wedding day, Fleur wears an elfin-made tiara that exerts a different sort of magic. When she wears it, the tiara transfigures those around her. Rather than adding to her own beauty, she is no longer the center of attention. Instead, everyone around her seems to glow. Her tiara renders the *other* people beautiful, and the wedding guests cannot understand how they never noticed it before – how all the faces of those around them shine.²

When the blind man declares that he believes that Jesus is the Son of God, suddenly by the Light of Christ – all the rest of us begin to

¹ Helen Keller, *Three Days to See*.

² J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Feb.-Mar., 2008.

shine with a radiant beauty. Our sin can no longer be accounted for our suffering. Our closed eyes are opened. Our faith becomes a mission to follow the One who heals, forgives, restores and redeems.

Sometimes all of that sets us apart from others – members of our family, our neighbors, even the so-called religious authorities. So that our lives begin to show forth His light, and every human person we meet begins to radiate with the goodness of God.

AMEN.