

ADMITTING OUR BLINDNESS SO THAT WE MIGHT SEE

John 9 – The Man Born Blind

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found, twas blind but now I see. Those famous words were written in the 18th century by John Newton, a former slave ship captain turned Anglican priest. The self-penned words on his tombstone tell of the transformation that took place in him.

JOHN NEWTON, Clerk [preacher]
Once an infidel and libertine
A servant of slaves in Africa,
Was, by the rich mercy
of our Lord and Saviour
JESUS CHRIST,
restored, pardoned and
appointed to preach
the Gospel which he had
long laboured to destroy.

Newton's hymn has long resonated with Christians. *Amazing Grace* is the best known and most popular of all Christian hymns. The hymn expresses our experience. We were lost but now are found. We were blind, but now we see. But, what blindness has Christ healed in us? And in what ways do we now see where we once were blind?

John's story of the man born blind shows on the one hand a blind man progressively gaining sight. On the other hand it shows the Pharisees progressively becoming more blind. The unnamed man was a blind beggar in Jerusalem. People might have pitied him enough to throw a few coins his way, but his condition confirmed public opinion that either he or his parents or both, were sinners. Some strange man put mud in his blind eyes and told him to wash in the pool of Siloam. He obeyed. Miraculously he was healed and for the first time in his life he could see! People stared at him in disbelief, but he kept exalting in his good fortune. We see him gaining in insight as the Pharisees ask his opinion about the man who healed him and he figures out that Jesus must be a prophet, one who represents God's life and Word. The Pharisees question him again. This time the man witnesses in words used by Newton for his immortal hymn: "*I do not know whether he (Jesus) is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.*" He proclaims the marvelous thing that Jesus has done. Finally, after he suffers for his witness and is kicked out of the Synagogue, Jesus finds him and asks if he believes in the Son of Man. "*Who is he, sir that I might believe in him?*" "*You have seen him and the one speaking to you is he*" Jesus tells him. He professes his belief and he worships Jesus. Indeed he fulfills Jesus' prophecy that he was born blind in order that the glory of God might be revealed in him.

The Pharisees on the other hand are becoming more and more blind. At first they are so sharp sighted that they easily identify other people's faults. Then they become more and more obstinate, ignoring the incredible miracle of new sight and focusing instead on the infraction of healing on the Sabbath. They refuse to recognize the wonderful power at work in Jesus and instead deny the miracle. Finally, Jesus accuses them of willful blindness. The Gospel story

continues with Jesus saying: *“I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”* Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to Jesus, *“Surely we are not blind, are we?”* Jesus said to them, *“If you were blind, you would have no sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.*

I don't think that the Pharisees had the market cornered on blindness. In what ways are we blind? We are all too often blind to our own faults and pretenses. In one of the oft quoted lines of his poetry, *“O wad some Power the giftie gie us to see ourselves as ithers see us!”* Robert Burns poem *To a Louse* tells the story of people in church sniggering at a louse (a little parasite) scurrying down the feather on a lady's fine and fancy bonnet.

The *Johari Window* (named simply for Joe and Harry who came up with the concept) shows a window with four panes. In the pane in the upper left hand corner is the part of ourselves that we're aware of and we let others see – our public persona. The pane on the bottom left represents the part of ourselves we keep hidden – our private selves. The pane on the upper right corner, like the lady with louse on her bonnet, is the part of ourselves we are blind to but others see. Finally the pane at the bottom right represents the part of ourselves that others don't see and we also are unaware – our unconscious. The goal in conceptualizing the *Johari Window* is to expand that first pane so that we see more of ourselves and not try and keep it hidden. And the only way to expand that first pane is to be open to and invite feedback to embark on that journey of self-discovery whereby we learn more about who we are.

A second way we are blind is in our prejudices and presuppositions. Whenever we assume a person's worth or what they will be like based on where they live, how they dress, where they're from, what language they speak, the color of their skin, or their religion we are living into a kind of blindness. The Pharisees had plenty of assumptions, starting with themselves. They were good. They obeyed the law in all its minutiae therefore they were good. Those who didn't follow the law were sinners, as were those who were chronically ill or disabled. We all have prejudices and presuppositions. I believe that God wants us to recognize them and question their validity.

A third way that we are often blind is through having a kind of tunnel vision. We tend to be self-absorbed. We get caught up in our own little worlds, in the concerns of our immediate family, our work, our small circle of friends, our neighborhood. We get so caught up in our own day to day worries and activities that we tend not to see beyond them.

Someone at coffee hour the other day reflected that *“newcomers never come to coffee hour.”* *“Wait a second,”* the person they were talking to protested, *“I just spent 15 minutes talking to two new families.”* *“Oh,”* the first person admitted, *“I usually talk with my friends so I guess I didn't notice there was anyone new.”* Pray that God will help us gain peripheral vision to see beyond the narrow focus of our own tunnel vision.

We tend to be blind also to God's presence all around us. We admire the beauties of nature but we don't stop to admire the Creator. We appreciate someone's generosity but we don't think where that generous spirit comes from. We have plenty of food, health, blessings galore, but we forget to give God thanks for them. The Bible sits dusty on our bookshelves because we fail to

pick it up and read. When we go through dark and troubled times we forget that God is there with us and we don't think to turn to him for help. It's easy to see the pain and struggle but not so easy to see the possibility for growth and transformation. When we are in the valley of the shadow of death we are often blind to the Good Shepherd who is there with us in the midst of it.

Last of all we are often blind to human need and suffering. Even after his conversion John Newton worked two more years as a captain of a slave ship. Only years later did he become an abolitionist and use his experience with the slave trade to graphically speak of its terrible cruelties and help convince the people of England to abolish the slave trade. When we are bombarded with images of hunger and poverty it is easy to become hardened to them. It's easy to ignore the injustice and human suffering. But our Lord doesn't ignore them. God looks with compassion on all people. He suffers with those who suffer; he hungers with those who hunger; he shares in the oppression of those who are put down; he came to earth to share our brokenness. He calls us to see with his own eyes of compassion for all people.

"I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind," Jesus said at the end of today's Gospel. Later in John 12:46 Jesus said, *"I have come as light into the world so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness."* How is Jesus inviting you to see with new eyes? What kind of blindness does he want to heal you of? How can John Newton's great hymn, *I once was blind but now I see* be a story of new sight for you?

In order to see we must first recognize and admit to the ways that we are blind. Jesus came for judgment that the lost might be found and the blind see. He also came for judgment that those who have the pretence to think they *see just fine thank you very much* will come to know how blind they really are. Pray for Jesus' healing touch to change the way we see the world and cure us of our blindness.

Amen.