

Seeing with Our Hearts
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 9:1-41

Lately I've been enjoying some amazing early-morning sunrises from the comfort of my living room rocking chair. Fiery pink, glowing orange, hazy purple... colors so rich and bright it's as if they were painted by the brush of a master artist. It is a remarkable sight, one that reminds me what a privilege it is to see, to see anything at all.

I cannot imagine what it is like to be born blind. Sure, I can pretend, I can close my eyes or tie a bandana around my head, but it's not the same. All it would take is to open my eyes again, and I will be able to see. And even when my eyes are closed, the images of all that I have seen, run through my mind. Imagination can be a powerful thing.

But when you are born blind, there are no images in your mind. Your sensory experience of color and depth, light and shadow, form and movement are limited. Imagine what it is like to experience life in four dimensions instead of five; being able to touch and taste, hear and smell, but not to see. Imagine smelling the flowers and feeling the delicate softness of their petals, but never knowing the beauty of the pale yellow streaks radiating from the center of lavender irises.

The man born blind is another story from John's Gospel meant to serve as a sign telling us that the realm of God is here, among us, in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. We've heard from Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night on a quest for illumination and the Samaritan woman who was promised Living Water at an ordinary well. Now we are invited into the struggles of a blind man so that we may wrestle with what it is to really see and truly believe.

It's a verrrry long story, one of those we have to read carefully in order to put all the puzzle pieces together. A man who was blind since birth was given sight by Jesus, causing some level of anxiety for those in religious authority. The man goes back home and is mis-identified by his neighbors – for some reason, they don't recognize him! Next, his parents are interrogated, but they aren't really sure what happened. Then he's

questioned by the religious officials at the temple (twice). The man has to tell his fantastic story of healing, again and again. Finally – and here’s my favorite part - he’s had enough! Those religious officials have just insulted him (and Jesus, too, for that matter). I love how Eugene Peterson’s “The Message” put it at the moment when he lets them have it, saying:

“This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! It is well known that God is not at the beck and all of sinners, but listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence and does his will. That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of – ever. If this man didn’t come from God, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.”¹

I’d like to say that this outburst from the man changed everything – that those in authority realized that they had misjudged and underestimated Jesus, that they welcomed the man’s new sight, and invited Jesus to join them for Bible study. None of that happened, of course. The religious officials called the healed blind man a sinner and drove him out.

In fact, this man, blind from birth, experienced what so many others do when they are on the margins of a faith community. People with disabilities, chronic conditions, or mental illness are on the margins. So are those who struggle with addiction, homelessness or poverty. We can add people whom we fear and those with whom we have painful histories, and the list gets very long.

Just like the man in today’s story, all of them experience being blamed for their situation. And just like the unnamed man, those on the margins have to tell their stories over and over again, often to people who don’t believe them, and sometimes to people who don’t even care. The neighbors either don’t recognize what is going on or ask nosy and inappropriately intrusive questions. Officials – religious and otherwise – don’t want to have their beliefs and routines challenged, so they dismiss what they hear. Family members are reluctant to be involved, fearful of being punished or shunned themselves.

But the man in this story was not left alone. After he was driven out by the religious officials, Jesus went and found him. Perhaps you know the popular refrain... *“I once was lost, but now I’m found ...”*

¹ John 9:30-33, from *The Message*

I want to say this next thing carefully. I am not saying that people on the margins, and those who are their advocates, will somehow be magically rescued from their travails by Jesus, or that the presence of Christ takes away the sting of the injustices they experience.

What I want us to notice, though, is that it is Jesus who takes the initiative to re-connect with the man in this story. Here's why I think that is important: We are inclined to talk about our faith in general, (and beginning this Wednesday, during Lent in particular), as a journey – as though we are in charge of planning an itinerary and booking all of the transportation and lodging.

But here, in this text, is another view altogether – the idea that the divine is seeking us, rather than the other way around. And that is true whether we are privileged or marginalized.

There is a tendency in churches like ours to give more attention to the humanity of Jesus than to the divinity. We are attentive to his preaching, to his compassion for people in need, to his prophetic voice for justice. We are, I think, somewhat less attentive to the ongoing presence of Jesus as the Risen Christ, somehow mysteriously present with us and in our world.

There are any number of reasons for this. Some among us were raised in religious traditions where the divinity of Christ was central, and we have run away from that. The vocabulary about Christ was filled with images of kingship, victory, and salvation – where salvation referred almost exclusively to life after death.

Others among us were raised to be suspicious of all things “spiritual,” that is, things that could not be detected by the senses or measured scientifically. Still others have explored and experienced spirituality in traditions and practices that are outside of Christianity.

In the United Church of Christ, we often talk about “*taking scripture seriously but not literally.*” By that we give ourselves permission to use all of the analytical and critical tools that we have to try and understand both the ancient meaning of the text and the ways that it may speak to us today.

In a similar vein, I hope that we can “*take Jesus seriously*” not so much by accepting the images and portrayals that others have offered, but rather by searching for Christ's presence.

As our ancient friend said to the religious officials in today's story, "[God] listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence." [John 9:31]

You understand (I hope) that I am not talking about "studying" Jesus by only intellectually "theologizing" about his life, ministry, and divine nature. I am talking about meeting Jesus in ways that engage our hearts and spirits as well as our minds; being open to a relationship with Jesus – and not just to the idea of Jesus – that informs how we live and how we love.

Our brothers and sisters in Evangelical Christianity often talk about "taking Jesus into your heart as your personal Lord and Savior". Folks in churches like ours are often made uncomfortable by that language and its fervor. Perhaps our more authentic confession would be this: "we are letting Jesus find us and take us into the divine heart".

Let's try and see Jesus as he is, not just the do-gooder storybook character we heard about in Sunday School, not just the stern-faced and passive and untouchable face we see in paintings, not just the too-sweet and too-soft and too-indulgent guardian angel we call on to watch over our every step.

This Transfiguration Sunday, let's try and see Jesus as the One who reveals the blinding glory of God's goodness, the One who announces the impending approach of God's day of reckoning and justice, the One who offers the richness of God's grace to every human being who seeks it, the One who restores our sight.

The One who opens our eyes ... to see each other. Not just in two dimensions, as part of the scenery of our lives. Not just as props to pass by or push aside or climb over or simply ignore on our way to wherever it is we want to go. Not just as allies to recruit or threats to eliminate -- but to see each other as whole persons, as people with feelings and pain and desire and humanity, as children of God endowed with beauty and value -- these, the members of our own families, the members of our church family, our neighbors, our rivals, our enemies.

Our experience doing that is unlikely to be as dramatic and public as the experience of the man who had been born blind. But the refrain is likely to be the same one we sang: *I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see ... Amen.*