

Eyes to See
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 9:1-17

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright, once told of an incident that had a profound influence on the rest of his life. The winter he was nine years old, he went walking across a snow-covered field with his reserved, strait-laced, no nonsense uncle. As the two of them reached the far end of the field, his uncle stopped and pointed out his own tracks in the snow, straight and true and unwavering. He then pointed out young Frank's tracks, which meandered all over the field.

"Notice how your tracks wander aimlessly, from the fence to the cattle to the woods and back again", his uncle said "and see how my tracks aim directly to my goal. There's an important lesson here."

Years later, Wright liked to tell how this moment contributed to his philosophy of life. *"I determined right then",* he said with a twinkle in his eye, *"not to miss most things in life, as my uncle had."*

Because, of course, we all miss things if we're too busy. But as our scripture for today points out, there's something holy and important about paying attention to our surroundings, and to the people near us.

After all, if we've been given eyes to see, we should use them.

The blind man was used to being overlooked. In his world, they didn't have anything we might recognize as a "healthcare system."

So, what did you do if you were born blind? Well, your parents would likely take you to the first-century equivalent of a certified, governmentally sanctioned healthcare professional, that is... the priest. And the priest told you what to do to ease your child's pain and make them whole again: *"Take two doves, have them properly sacrificed at the temple's high altar, and call me in the morning. That should clear your sign right up. Follow my prescription and your child will be able to see again."*

This system worked OK for those who had the resources to pay for it. But what if your family was poor and you couldn't afford the doves, or the travel costs involved to see the specialists at the Jerusalem altar?

Now grown, this one born blind often felt as though the rest of the world was inflicted with a vision impairment. As he sat there begging, trying to scrape together enough to live each day, most people walked past him quickly, eyes averted. He couldn't see them, of course, but he could feel and hear their footsteps as they came closer and then retreated. *"Maybe I'm not just blind,"* he would sometimes think *"Maybe I'm also invisible."*

That is... until Jesus came by one day. The blind man wasn't looking for a miracle. He had become used to a life of daily begging, living on scraps. He'd become used to being overlooked, so it was a bit uncomfortable when he heard a large group stop in front of him.

"Teacher... who sinned, this man or his parents that he would be born blind like this?"

The blind man had heard this spiel before, with all the usual answers... that his parents had messed up and somehow he was the one to carry the brunt of the punishment as some kind of crazy inheritance, or that he had actually sinned in-utero somehow, meaning that when he was born he was already cursed.

He rolled his sightless eyes, sure that no one would notice.

But then he heard the teacher answer. *"No one, neither he nor his parents."*

Wow. That was new. And while he was trying to make sense of this answer, he heard someone move closer. He heard someone spit, and he felt something sticky and strange being pressed on his eyes. Was that mud? It smelled like dirt. Like the dirt God was said to have used to make humans at the very beginning.

What was happening? The man who had spoken then said to him, *"go wash in the pool of Siloam"*. Figuring that he was going to have to get that muddy yucky stuff off his face, the blind man asked for someone to help him find the pool. Once he and his helper arrived, he eased himself down into the water and sat there for a while, rubbing his face.

When he opened his eyes, his world was filled with light. He looked around, but he was alone. Where was the man? Slowly he crawled out of the pool and grasping the walls of the buildings, he staggered back into town.

It didn't make much sense. He didn't know who healed him, he never saw his face, so he wasn't ready for the interrogation that awaited him.

Crowds quickly gathered as he stumbled back into their midst, his eyes clear and wide. People wondered aloud if he was really the one who had sat for so long begging on that corner. *"But how did this happen?"* He told them about the man and the mud and the water. *"Well, where is that man that healed you?"* they asked. *"To be honest, I didn't get a good look at him. Having been blind at the time",* the seeing man replied, *"so you'll have to forgive me, I just don't know."*

The crowd decided that maybe the religious authorities would know what was going on, so they brought the man to the Pharisees. So he told his story again about the spit and the mud and the pool. And the questions became more pointed. *"Did you know that today was the Sabbath? Someone somewhere has been breaking the rules. We thought for a long time that it was you or maybe your parents. But now we're beginning to think that the Rule Breaker is this healer Jesus."*

From every side, the man was bombarded with questions. *"How were your eyes opened? Where is the man who did it? How could he do that? What did he do to you? Did your healer intentionally break the Sabbath? What do you say about him now that he has opened your eyes?"*

Not one person said hallelujah, or praise God. No one asked the man what it was like to see for the first time in his life, or whether the light hurt his eyes. No one asked the man how he was feeling. No one asked the man what he would do now. Not even the man's parents, frightened and not wanting to offend anyone... they just slipped quietly back into the shadows.

Finally, he said the only true thing he knew anymore. *"Look. All I know was this. I was blind. And now I can see."*

The once blind man had become a witness to a savior he had never seen, and now he had to work out his own faith with fear and trembling. The seeing man had to figure out what his life would mean, now that he was no longer blind. Who was he now?

The religious authorities never seemed bothered by his struggle when he was blind. He was, to them, a sign of what happens when people don't follow the rules, a convenient object lesson begging on the corner but little more.

But now his neighbors were forced to recognize that maybe what they had become accustomed to was not in fact the way things were meant to be.

Confronted as they now were by their own blindness and so outraged at the way that their rules were being challenged by this ungrateful man, the Pharisees told the seeing man that he was no longer welcome in their sanctuary. Someone had sinned, but they had stopped caring whether it was the man his parents or Jesus. All they knew was that his continued presence there made them uncomfortable and he had to go, *"You aren't welcome here anymore"*.

The seeing man stands silently, studying the faces around him, trying to match voices with names he had carried in his head. He looks at his hands and sees them for the first time. The light filtering in through the atrium, never in his wildest dreams imagined that the world could be like this... so full of light and color.

It's like he has been born into a whole new world, one so different than the one he had known. He doesn't understand why everyone is so angry and upset. Stumbling down the steps of a sanctuary he is no longer welcome in, he finally sits down.

He's not sure where to go, but it won't be back to that old corner, not back to that old life. He looks at the blue sky and palm trees above. He watches the people walk, smiling at the small children who keep getting distracted by bugs and flowers and must run to catch back up with their mothers, and laughs a little to himself.

Then a stranger sits down next to him. *"Hello"* he says. The voice sounds so familiar. The seeing man turns and looks deep into the man's dark brown eyes *"are you the one?" "Yes. I am."*

Falling to his knees, the man has no words to express his thanks towards the one who has come back for him. Nothing has made sense for him since he climbed out of that pool and wiped the mud from his eyes. His world has completely changed and the people he thought would be happy are angry instead.

But this man, the one who gave him this gift, has come back. And now the seeing man knows he knows what he will do with the rest of his life. He's ready to follow Jesus wherever he might lead.

As we encounter this story, we are often left to wonder who is truly blind. Is it the man whose eyes didn't work? Or is it the people who had failed to see him when he sat begging by the side of the road? Or maybe the religious authorities who were so stuck in their judgement?

After all, even after Jesus gives the man back his sight, there are so many who still cannot recognize or see him for who he is. Perhaps we too are more blind than we like to admit, dragged down in this life by our anxiety or fear. Unable to see the beauty of the world anymore because we've been distracted by the hustle and bustle of a life too busy, wandering among the rules and regulations of a life that needs to follow a certain path.

But even for us, Jesus meets us in those places of darkness and when he appears our vision clears. We can't explain it, all we know is that it happened just as clear as day. And the only testimony we can give is this: *we have met a God who sees us, even when we are blind. A God who finds us, even when we are lost. A savior who loves us and who will, in the end, come back to us and give us a whole new life. Amen.*