

John 9:1-41

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Whichever way you turn, there is the face of God.

Clear as Mud?

When I was in the ninth grade at Unicoi County High School, in Erwin, Tennessee, our physics teacher used to drone on for a while, then, looking at our glazed expressions, he would say to us: "Is that clear as mud?"

Maybe that expression "clear as mud" came from this Gospel story, when Jesus brings sight and clarity by making a mud poultice with his spit, and dirt. It's a visceral, gripping image. After washing in the pool called "Sent", the man born blind is given physical sight, but he also is the one who can truly see who Jesus is. Though the religious authorities interrogate the man, and intimidate his parents, he bravely speaks the truth about Jesus.

Everyone in this story is challenged with seeing and not seeing. I think of how we sometimes have blinders on, especially when it comes to seeing others with the light of compassion. It's far easier to see how people aren't measuring up to our expectations, than it is to see the best in them.

What do you think keeps us from seeing with the eyes of our hearts? Here are a few suggestions: Over-familiarity. Fear. Arrogance.

Naturalist and writer Annie Dillard wrote an essay called "Seeing", noting how difficult it is for those who are newly-sighted. She referred to a book by Marius von Senden, called *Space and Sight*. When Western surgeons discovered how to perform safe cataract operations, they ranged across Europe and America operating on dozens of [people] of all ages who had been blinded by cataracts since birth. . . the histories are fascinating. Many doctors had tested their patients' sense perceptions and ideas of space both before and after the operations. The vast majority of patients. . .of all ages, had. . .no idea of space whatsoever. . . Before the operation a doctor would give a blind patient a cube and a sphere; the patient would tongue it or feel it with his hands, and name it correctly. After the operation the doctor would show the same objects to the patient without letting him touch them; now he had no clue whatsoever what he was seeing. One patient called lemonade "square" because it pricked on his tongue as a square shape pricked on the touch of his hands. . . In general, the newly sighted see the world as a dazzle of color-patches. They are pleased by the sensation of color, and learn quickly to name the colors, but the rest of seeing is tormentingly difficult. . . It is overwhelming for many . . .to realize. . . the tremendous size of the world, which they had previously conceived of as something touchingly manageable.

. . . [Many of those with new sight refused to use their new vision, continuing to go over objects with their tongues, and [falling into] despair. . . One twenty-one-year-old girl, carefully shuts her eyes whenever she goes about the house, especially when she comes to a staircase. She's never more at ease than when, by closing her eyelids, she relapses into her former state of total blindness."

The blindness is familiar. We've learned to navigate in certain ways. Familiarity can block our seeing. Sometimes this happens in families. I remember when my sons were young, their development was always outpacing my seeing them changed. They'd learn something new, and I was scrambling to catch up. In some ways, that is even true in these young adult years that they are in. They are growing quickly in their philosophies and thoughts. The challenge when I see them after months apart, is to see who they are, now, not who they were a few months ago.

Fear – also, can keep us from seeing others, truly. In the spring of 2020, early in the pandemic, we literally feared one another, keeping masked and distanced. That fear played into some of the polarization that was also happening, politically. I know of many extended families, including my own, that learned to avoid talking about politics or religion, for fear of volatile disagreements that could cause a permanent rift in relationship. Sadly, that caution often means skating on the surface of conversation, and not truly seeing into one another's lives, fears, and hopes.

Arrogance is another block to seeing. In the Gospel reading, the Pharisees were so concerned with following the law to the letter, they were blind to the power of Jesus' healing and presence. They were bent on catching others in wrong doing, rather than seeing afresh, what God was making happen before their very eyes. If you want to see our human tendency to blind spots, go no further than reading comments on social media. It really doesn't bring out our best. . .

The blind man spoke from the truth of his experience. The Pharisees were blinded by the status quo, and their own access to power. It's similar, I think, to the challenge that those of us born white in this country, struggle to see our access to belonging, and power, by virtue of our skin color. In encountering Jesus, things are transformed, but when we are comfortable with the status quo, we are loathe to see it.

You, and I, St. Andrew friends, are in a time of great transition. Seventeen years of wonderful pastoral leadership ended last December. For me, twenty years of wonderful pastoral work in an other congregation ended in February. Now, the familiar is gone. What can we see in this unusual time? Can we see with the eyes of our hearts?

During my second week as your interim pastor, and with some wonderful sunny days, I took my first walks around the lake, just across the street. The sights were eye-popping! My eyes were opened to little budding jonquils, Canadian Geese, Mallard ducks nesting, a Great Blue Heron, a huge variety of little birds in the foliage, two

nutria, nibbling grass just a couple feet away from me. And I believe I saw an otter, swimming. I could have easily seen all of that, had I been looking on my phone. But, all that natural beauty that made me pause, in wonder.

In that same study that I quoted from Annie Dillard—there was a story of a twenty-two-year-old girl born blind, and given sight by cataract surgery. At first, she was dazzled by the world's brightness and kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When she opened her eyes again, she did not recognize objects, but, the more she looked around, the more and more astonished she was by what she could see. She repeatedly exclaimed: "Oh God! How beautiful!"

I'd like to close this sermon by inviting you to turn and look at the people sitting on either side of you, and ahead and behind you. Just look. If you are watching remotely, and no one is home, I invite you to look carefully at the congregation gathered here. Look, and see who has gathered to be part of this body of Christ.

And, when you leave the sanctuary today, I invite you to touch the water from the font, and know that you are "sent" to see the wonder of God's creation. We are sent to see others with the eyes of our hearts.