Sunday, January 28, 1973
A KIND OF BLINDNESS
Matthew 13:53-58; John 1:43-46

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” “Where did this man Jesus get his wisdom? Is he not the carpenter’s son?” Jesus was not always well received by people. When Philip told Nathanael that he had found the person of whom the prophets had spoken, all he could think of was that Jesus was from Nazareth and he had never known anyone of any importance from Nazareth.

And when Jesus returned to his hometown to teach and preach there as he had done in other places, the people were not ready to accept him. “Where did he get any wisdom,” they asked. “Why, we knew him as a little boy. We watched him grow up. He was nothing so special.”

Why were people so blind to the ministry and message of Jesus? Why did Nathanael make such a snap judgment?

Sometimes we may be too hard on the townspeople of Nazareth, or on Nathanael. We too often have a -kind of blindness about people and events, and people have some- times made quick judgments on us based only on what they consider past experience.

Bernard Shaw, the famous English writer once said, “The only man who behaves sensibly is my tailor; he takes my measurements anew every time he sees me, while all the rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them.”

That’s exactly what the townspeople of Nazareth were doing — measuring Jesus by their previous association with him, as they had known him before; thinking of him only as they knew him as a boy and as a young man working in a carpenter’s shop. Unlike the tailor, they did not take a new measurement of him when he returned to his hometown.

It happens all the time. Throughout our own experience, people form a certain opinion of us in our personal or professional lives; and even though we ourselves, in the natural order of events, grow, develop, constantly change, if they are asked to express an opinion of us, are very apt to judge us or evaluate us by what they knew of us in a very early stage of our development. A new measurement is not taken.

As parents, we know the difficulty of taking a new measure-ment of our children as they grow and mature. We tend to think of them always as mere children or babies who don’t know very much, who can’t make decisions; and young people can make the same mistake with their parents. They think that older people do not change or grow. A new measure-ment is not taken.

But the problem is throughout society and not only with people but also with events, ideologies and with our Christian faith.

Last fall, the Lincoln Evening Journal carried a front-page story about a young black man who had been told that he was retarded at age 14. He was in prison and had been given an I. Q. test on which the score was computed at 69. You are seriously retarded, he was told.

But Harold Howard refused to believe it. He went to see about getting some education, but again he was to1d that he wasn't too bright. Not to be put down, at age 15, he started third grade. In weeks, he had finished the 8th grade and then sometime later, high school. With scholarships from the state Bureau of Vocational Rehabili-tation, he finished four years of college at Kentucky State with a degree in sociology.

Today, Howard is carrying a 4.0 straight A grade average in the University of Louisville graduate school and is earning $9,000 a year as project director for the Youth Service Bureau there, an agency that seeks to help keep youngsters out of jail.

"What it proves to me," he said, "is that we need to stop categorizing people. These people made a mistake If they did it to me, how many other young blacks have they done the same thing to.?"

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" "He's only a carpenter's son. Where did he get any wisdom?

Many convicts have come out of prison only to find that even though they have served their time and are really trying to be new people — society as a whole and many of us as individuals do not take a new measurement! Further-more it's one of our weaknesses as human beings that many of us tend to become what people think of us.

The problem is everywhere. One man recently told me about his experience. He said, "I had a letter not long ago from a dear eighty-year-old woman. She wrote me a nice letter which began, 'My dear Willie,' and I knew at once that she must have known me in my hometown when I was a child. And sure enough, that was a good guess, for as the letter continued, she said, "I remember you as a seven-year-old boy, sitting high up in an apple tree who spit on me when I passed under that tree."

Then the man went on to say — "Now it would not be quite fair to judge me today at the half-century mark by what I did when I was seven years old. I have long since ceased either climbing apple trees or spitting on innocent people who pass under apple trees. I hope that I have grown a little since those days and have changed my ways a lot."

As I listened to the incident, I thought of my own childhood, and I hope that people in my hometown do not think 0£ me primar±1y in re1ation to some of the things I did as a small boy.

Yet I find that I often do that to other people. As I meet people who are younger than me and who are now successful businesspersons, doctors, teachers, I find that I tend to think of them as I knew them when they were children. I have not done like the wise tailor and taken a new measurement.

Again, this is what happened to Jesus when he returned to his hometown. And Nathanael made the same mistake by only judging him according to where he came from. We have a kind of blindness.

A little over a week ago, another article appeared in the local paper which told of an experiment in which eight individuals faked schizophrenia and were never discovered as sane by doctors in a mental hospital. After gaining entry to the hospitals, the group then acted in as normal a fashion as possible. Having been categorized, even incorrectly, the group of eight

was unable to get the record set straight and finally were dismissed as persons with the label “Schizophrenia in remission.”

Although the experiment is one which used trickery that is not a legitimate part of any kind of research, it does leave us a bit uneasy. How many persons might be wrongly confined and how many should be confined who are not.

More than that, the experiment backs up the fact that people have a tendency to make surface judgments of others. It is easy to look at and meet an individual and quickly de-cide what you think of him or her. You may decide the per-son is unfriendly, an extrovert, an optimist, truthful, dis-honest or what have you.

Also, the experiment shows how difficult it can be to escape from any tag or label that may be hung on you or the group or race or nationality to which you belong. This has been a serious problem with many minority groups in · this country. We assume that they possess certain un-desirable characteristics simply as a matter of heredity.

How many people attribute to blacks’ patterns of conduct or behavior based solely on the color of skin, a completely false thought process. A newspaper cartoon not long ago showed a well-dressed black man, hurrying along, making pro-gress, in a business-like fashion. On the sidelines in the cartoon stood a white man. scratching his head in bewilderment and watching in dismay and disbelief — and he was saying — "But you’re just supposed to shuffle along!”

In a similar vein, we’ve often heard people say and perhaps have said it ourselves — "Indians are lazy.” Or, “they’re never on time, you can’t depend on them.” Think of all the various broad generalizations there are around which cause us to have a kind of blindness — the same kind of blindness which the townspeople of Nazareth had about Jesus, or which Nathanael had.

When we begin to overcome that kind of blindness, we also begin to see some wonderful and surprising new things about people, especially people we have misjudged.

The good news of the Christian faith is that God does not judge us just by what he knows of our past. God takes new measurements all the time. When Jesus met people, he accepted them simply as human beings open to new possibilities.

fortunately for us, there are many among us who are open to seeing things in a new way. Part of the meaning of conversion, of being born again, or twice born as some like to put it, is that we begin to see things differently and overcome this kind of blindness. 5.

I think that when St. Paul talked about the “new person” or the “twice born” he was trying to say that we don’t have to be what we once were; that we can be more than we presently are, and that every day (even every minute) of our lives offers us a chance — to demonstrate our ability to move, walk, gain territory on ourselves, overcome our blindness.

But not only do we have to be open to seeing people in a new way and take — new measurements because of the changes that occur, but we also have to be willing to see the world and events in it in a new way.

In spite of the 20th century with all its magnificent technology, many of us still view it to be too much like a small Western town in the early days of our nation, be-fore sheriffs and judges and courts turned the town into a genuine “community.”

Everybody arms himself for what he claims is defense; but the line between defense and aggression is a thin one, and nobody has the authority to decide which is truly which.

While our scientific and technical achievement staggers the imagination, many of our civil and political arrangements have not progressed much beyond the frontier mentality. Each nation is its own law, its own sheriff, its own judge. Each has its own arsenal of weapons hidden away, and — out of fear more than hostility — each feels it must maintain an “arms superiority” over the others.

The western towns could not long have existed in this fashion, for only the outlaws flourished as long as the law was in private hands. And the country did not grow and prosper until all assented to a common law with enforceable powers.

The world needs today to see itself more and more as one and we need to see it that way. The western towns grew too big for anarchy, and the modern world has grown too small for it. It’s as if we were all locked into the same little cabin on a spaceship and any shot through the ceiling can depressurize the craft, destroying the destroyer along with the victim.

The ceasefire signed yesterday evening, and the fact that the major powers seem to be willing to guarantee the cease-fire in Vietnam is some evidence that some of our blindness 6. is being overcome and we and other nations are taking new measurements of each other, making new assessments of the world. We are all grateful for that.

There is also evidence that we in this nation are beginning to take a new look at the Communist nations. We are learning that they are not all one and the same and that the Russia of today may be quite different than the Russia of Stalin. Just as individuals change as they grow and as circumstances around them change, so also nations and ideologies change, and new measurements need to be taken. The President’s trip to China last year was an example of taking a new look. Since then, others have made similar trips. There is hope when at least we are open to looking anew at what is happening in such countries and are open to new kinds of relationships among the nations of the world.

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” The Bible says, “don’t judge too quickly what God might be doing in lowly Nazareth or in other places as well.“ Who knows where God might be working? What a surprise that man from Nazareth turned out to be. He was a dissenter, a man condemned to a most humiliating kind of death who nevertheless emerged as God in the flesh.

Because the people of Nazareth had a kind of blindness and could not see Jesus in any other way save as they knew him as a boy, the Bible reports — "He could do no mighty works there because of their unbelief.” Not because he didn’t have the power — but because of their lack of expectancy, their blindness. God’s power to do great things in the world and in our lives and in the lives of others seems to be partly conditioned by our faith, our expectancy, our’ willingness to take new measurements.

So, our faith calls us to be continually aware of our own kinds of blindness and to be willing to see things in a new way; to be willing to take new measurements often of per-sons we think we know so well, of events, and of the world. Then God may open doors where we thought there was no door. Amen.