Sunday March 29, 1981

Book 10

"BEING HEALED OF BLINDNESS" John 9:1-11

The healing of individuals who are blind by Jesus is a ~~familiar~~ theme in the Gospels. Stories like the one just read are found in all four Gospels. The early church remembered such stories and wrote them down not only because of the act of physical healing, but also because such stories had a deeper meaning. Clarity of vision is more than just being able to see with one's eyes the world around us. It also means possession of knowledge, having understanding, and especially in relation to God. In the Biblical tradition, people who are ignorant of God, or refuse to know God, are described as living in the dark--they are blind.

In our own language we frequently use the images of sight and blindness, light and darkness. We say. "He or she saw the light," meaning that the individual came to a new understanding, a fresh awareness. Or we say, "That person is in the dark on that matter," or we intimate that someone has kept us in the dark, or that someone has shown us the light. Or to indicate that we understand, we say, "I see,"

The point is that in the Gospel stories, miracles of the healing of the blind are never recorded merely as acts of physical healing, but carry in addition a broader meaning of coming to understand God in a new way. Jesus brings people from darkness into light, from blindness to sight. As one verse of an old Gospel hymn puts it--"Once I was blind, but now I can see, the light of the world is Jesus."

So these Gospel stories have a message for all of us. Even though we have the gift of seeing with our eyes, most of us are blind in some other ways. We all need to be healed of one form of blindness or another. Let's see then what this story has to say about our blindness and its healing.

1. First of all, like the disciples, we often ask the wrong question about blindess in ourselves and in others. Remember, their first question was, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?"

It's an interesting question for speculation, but even if we could answer it, the answer has no effect on being healed.

It's also the wrong question because it is based on a false assumption--namely that someone's sin is the direct cause of any calamity. Sometimes someone's sin might be involved, but rarely is there such a simple direct cause and effect relationship.

In this case if the cause of the man's blindness was his own sin, then since he was born blind, he must have sinned either while still in his mother's womb, which is highly unlikely, or in some previous existence with the punishment being deferred.

We make a mistake if we ~~always~~ always assume a direct cause and effect relationship. But people still ask the question. A retarded child is born, and the parents and others ask, "What did we do to deserve this? Why is God punishing us?" There's nothing in the Christian faith which teaches that each calamity is the direct result of a particular sin, or that each tragedy comes as punishment for some sin. Rather Jesus said, "God makes his rain to fall on the just and the unjust."

Furthermore simply to work hard at assigning blame is most of the time not very helpful. Thus Jesus told his disciples when they asked the question--"It was not that this man sinned or his parents that he was born blind, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him."

The important point, Jesus said to them and he says to us, if you are blind in any way, you can be healed of your blindness--even if you are blind from the time of your birth.

2. Secondly, like the man who was healed in this story, some of us are blind from the time of our birth. There are those among us who from little on up have trouble accepting anything new or out of the ordinary. Some people seem to be born with closed minds as well as closed eyes. There are those who haven't been open to a fresh or new idea or even listened to one since they were born.

Others of us are not blind from birth, but become blind as we grow older. We put on blinders and refuse to

consider any new evidence on any subject. Not too many years ago, a well-known English scientist wrote: "Neither the testimony of all the Fellows of the Royal Society, nor even the evidence of my own senses would lead me to believe in the transmission of thought from one person to another independently of the recognized channels of sense." Here is a scientist saying, "I've got my mind made up and I won't believe it even if it is proved true."

Institutions can be blind as well as individuals. All the world knows of the pressure of the Roman Church which forced Galileo to recant his false and heretical opinion that the earth was not stationary and not the center of the universe. Two hundred years later the chemical manufacture of industrial diamonds was delayed for decades because a chemist of genius was forced to recant and declare in public that he had not manufactured diamonds, but made a mistake in an experiment.

All of us know the suffering and tragedy which the blindness of prejudice has caused through the centuries. The blindness that believes and teaches that one group of people is inferior or superior by reason of the color of their skin has caused more innocent suffering than almost any other kind of blindness. The blindness that has kept women out of many areas of life and still does is similar in nature. All of us need to be healed of such kinds of blindness.

Medical science has its own kind of blindness. Twenty years before Pasteur stated his theory of germ disease, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr, in America, and Ignaz Semmelweis in Vienna, had held that germs on doctor's hands caused death in childbirth and surgery. Both of these men went down in utter defeat--Holmes retiring to write essays and humorous poetry, while Semmelweis was driven out of his mind, into an asylum and to an early death.

We all have our kinds of blindness or blind spots whether we are blind from birth or become blind to new ideas and new understanding as we grow older and being healed is often difficult. New ways of seeing and understanding the world and God are nearly always received with coolness, even mockery, hostility and persecution.

One reason we resist being healed of our blindness is that we get so comfortable in our old way of seeing and doing things, and we are afraid that new knowledge will disturb our comfort and security. We don't like to enlarge our frame of reference.

Thus all new theories and innovations appear to us as muddled, incomplete and confusing. The physicist Niels Bohr once said, "There is no hope for any speculation that does not look absurd at first glance. He then remarked of an idea advanced by his famous colleague, Werner Heisenberg, "It isn't crazy enough to be true." As it turned out it wasn't.

Of course when we stubbornly refuse to be healed of our blindness, we are in distinguished company. The French Academy announced at one point that it would not accept any further reports of meteorites, since it was clearly impossible for rocks to fall out of the sky. Shortly thereafter a rain of meteorites came close to breaking the windows of the Academy.

For some reason we are afraid of the unknown, afraid of that which we cannot explain. And we think if we can name it, we can explain it and then we believe we are in control of it. So even when our old forms and our old ideas are failing miserably, even when they cannot handle the problems of the day, they are fiercely defended; those who challenge them are derided. Generation after generation, human-kind fights to preserve the status quo maintaining, "better the devil you know than the devil you don't know," a bit of folk cynicism that assumes the unknown to be dangerous.

In the process we become enslaved to our old ways of seeing and doing. Much of the blindness of our country's foreign policy since the end of World War II, comes from the fact that we have refused to question our basic assumptions.

On his historic visit to the United States, Tocqueville took a trip down the Ohio River. On one hand was Ohio, a free state; on the other Kentucky, a slave state. On the Ohio side of the river he observed industrious activity, rich harvests, handsome homes. The Ohioan could enter any path fortune might open to him. He might become

a sailor, or a pioneer, an artisan, a laborer. On the Kentucky side, Tocqueville saw only indolence. Not only were the slaves half-hearted in their labors, but the masters themselves were enslaved. They could not work their own land because that would demean their status.

3. A third point to remember is that in the story of the man being healed of his blindness, many who saw it and heard about it, would not rejoice. All they could do was find fault with the healing. Why is it that some of us have so much difficulty being happy at the good fortune of others?

Why is it that we are also cynical about changes for the good in other people? A convict makes a turnabout in his life and we say it won't last. Too often we stand by and say, "You didn't really change," or "You can't change," That's another form of blindness of which we all need to be healed.

And here's the good news--when we are open to new ideas and new ways of seeing the world and God, life becomes exciting. The happiest people I know are those who are not afraid of the unknown, who are open to mystery, who know that they do not have a corner on the truth, who are willing to consider new evidence, who are not afraid to examine their basic assumptions. These shifts in awareness are then experienced as awakening, liberating, unifying, transforming. That's a lot of what it means to be born again.

Jesus wants to heal each one of us of our blindness whatever kind it might be. God wants us to keeping seeing in new ways.

Seeing things in a new way, or seeing for the first time, might be compared to the discovery of the "hidden pictures" in children's magazines. You look at a sketch that appears to be a tree and a pond. Then someone asks you to look more closely--to look for something you had no reason to believe was there. Suddenly you see camoflaged objects in the scene; the branches become a fish or a pitchfork, the lines around the pond hide a toothbrush. No one can talk you into seeing the hidden pictures. You are not persuaded the objects are there. Either you see them or you don't But once you have seen them, they are plainly there whenever youlook at the drawing. You wonder how you missed them before.

God's creation is filled with such hidden pictures which we do not often see because of our blindness. But we can be healed!

Here's a short eye-test for Christians--some of the things you can see when your blindness is being healed--

1. God is seen primarily as a God of love--that's what Jesus taught and lived above all. Even the most mean-spirited of people then begin to relinquish their grasp on their agression, lose their anger and reconnect to the living force of God which is Love.

2. On any everyday level, our new seeing begins to shift our time frame from the temporal to the eternal; we accept impermanence and cease struggling to keep the same all that must change. "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away--Blessed be the name of the Lord." We know that all things pass away--only God is eternal. We experience life's blows and blessings with greater equanimity.

3. We begin to understand that the mere accumulation of things does not bring meaning to our living.

4. We also begin to see and understand that no matter how much we grow in knowledge and understanding, there is still mystery. We will never know all the truth while we are in this world. As St. Paul wrote, "we see through a glass darkly, or through a mirror dimly." Having our blindness healed does not give us perfect sight. We know that there is always yet more truth to break forth from God's word.

But above all, do not be afraid of being healed of your blindness--you will even begin to see and experience God in new ways and what could be more exciting than that.