Sunday, August 2, 1987
SEEING GOD AND OTHERS IN NEW WAYS
Leviticus 19:11-14; Luke 4:16-21

Some sermons have strange beginnings and come together in unusual ways. Last Monday, I was reading an article in a professional journal that I regularly receive. It contained a story that I thought would be useful for a sermon. Next, I began to read the Wall Street Journal and noticed that the National Federation of the Blind had bought a page and a half of space to get a message across to the public. The headline of the message said, “Air Travel And the Blind: What is the Problem, What is the Remedy?” I read the entire ad, and I discovered that the main points it was making connected with the story I had read earlier — so I had the beginnings of this sermon.

Let’s begin with the story. A small three-year-old child was playing in his father’s workshop. The workshop was filled with leather pieces and tools for punching and sewing leather because his dad was a harness maker. The little boy was able to reach one of the tools — a leather punch. Imitating his dad, the boy placed the tool on the leather and punched. Nothing happened. The little face bent lower to determine what might be wrong. The punch slipped. A scream brought his father, Simeon, rushing across the room. His son’s left eye was bleeding from a deep wound.

The year was 1812, and medical science knew little about treating injuries to the human eye. In addition, France was at war, and doctors who might have been available were tending the wounded in Napoleon’s army. A few more days of anxious waiting brought more bleak news: the other eye was swollen; the infection had spread.

Soon there came a morning when a sister appeared to wake her brother. “Why are you getting me up while it is still dark?” he asked. The sister replied, “It isn’t dark. It’s a bright day, and the sun is already high.” Never again would this individual see the bright sunshine.

Attitudes toward the disabled in the 19th century were cruel. Blind, lame, and deaf people were considered to be cursed by God and were often objects of scorn.

However, Louis was surrounded by caring, challenging adults. His father was determined that the boy would be allowed to harness all his remaining talents. When little Louis would stumble crossing a room and his mother would rush to his aid, his father would gently hold her back. “No, let him find his own way.” Encouraged by his father, Louis learned to move about his home and soon could be trusted on the village streets.

Another positive influence on Louis was the local priest. Father Paully saw behind those sightless eyes a brilliant and eager mind.

On one of his visits to the home, Father Paully announced wonderful news: he had persuaded the school officials to allow Louis to attend school. The boy’s joy was later matched by the school officials’ surprise when they discovered at the end of the first semester that the student with the highest grades was Louis.

But Louis’s academic victories were short-lived. When the village schoolmaster was transferred to a distant part of France, local students were shifted to a neighboring district.

There, the officials were adamant: no blind child would clutter up their class. A depressed Louis retreated to the loneliness of his room.

Father Paully did not give up. He discovered that there was a school for the blind in Paris, only a half-day's journey away. There, Louis could attend class with other children like himself. He could even be taught music. And most remarkable of all, it was rumored that the school owned books specially printed for the blind.

Unfortunately, Louis's new school fell far short of its reputation. Its administration was more concerned with discipline than with learning. Indeed, attitudes toward the disabled were scarcely better there than on the streets of the city. Most disappointing of all were the books promised for the blind. They were created by simply embossing large, regular letters on the page so that, by using one's fingers, one could laboriously identify them one by one. Deciphering a single paragraph could take more than 15 minutes. Moreover, there were only 14 such books in existence.

However, one fall, Louis returned to school to discover that a new headmaster had been appointed, a man whose compassionate approach was a striking contrast to that of his predecessor. Dr. Pignier showed interest in each of those under his care and paid special attention to Louis.

At a weekly assembly that fall, the new headmaster presented a novel device consisting of a slate and stylus for punching holes in paper that had been devised by the French military for passing information in the noise and darkness of battle. By punching in patterns, coded messages could be put in the paper and read by the fingertips.

"Of course," Dr. Pignier cautioned, "the holes take up so much space that only the simplest messages can be sent in this way. But the device makes an interesting toy. Some of you may want to play with it in the library."

Louis rushed directly to the library. What a fascinating idea! In a few minutes, he had mastered the system, and then he began to try to simplify it. Each evening after spending the necessary time with his studies, Louis turned to the slate and stylus. He slept little. A nagging cough that had been with him for months became worse.

When he returned home that summer, his parents were distressed at the sight of their emaciated son. Equally disturbing were the number of hours he spent with the strange new equipment, punching meaningless holes in endless pieces of paper.

Late in the summer, a new approach occurred to Louis. He imagined a small cell of six dots, two across and three deep. How many combinations could be made with that arrangement? He discovered that he could encode ten different letters by using only the top four dots. Punching out one bottom dot and repeating the original patterns gave him ten additional codes. By using the other bottom dots, he could complete the alphabet — with potential codes remaining.

In a tiny space, he had created letters and words that could quickly be decoded by the fingertips. His hand could race across a page as quickly as seeing eyes could read. And with practice, he could punch out a message fast enough to take notes in class and write letters home.

At age 15, Louis Braille had devised a system of reading and writing that would transform the lives of blind people throughout the world.

If we lived in an ideal world, this would be the end of the story. The advantages of the Braille system were so significant that it should have been adopted immediately by schools around the world.

But the system was a victim of jealousy, intrigue, and the French government being absorbed in war and revolution. A full decade passed before it was officially sanctioned at the institute where Louis had studied and since then become a respected instructor.

Even after his system was adopted in his own school, Louis Braille faced tremendous challenges. The system needed perfecting, especially in matters of punctuation. Numbers and musical symbols had to be included. So many books were to be transcribed and made available to the students. Other schools and other nations needed to be made aware of the system. These tasks, plus his normal teaching, consumed him. Disappointments continued, as workers with the blind in other places refused to consider his system. Was this because of misunderstanding, jealousy, or both?

Braille pressed on with his work, but his body became thinner, his color more pallid. There came a fall when he could not walk down the halls of the institute to meet his classes. He lingered through Christmas, past his 43rd birthday, to the Feast of the Epiphany, when he died. The Paris newspapers did not even mention his death.

Louis Braille taught many people to see. He brought recovery of sight to the blind. As I read about him, I thought of what Jesus said in his first sermon in his home synagogue. He read from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.”

Jesus undoubtedly also knew the words from the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament where all of us are reminded: “You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God.”

Those of us who are not physically blind, or deaf, and who have the use of all of our arms and legs frequently define “disability” too narrowly. Harold Wilke, a United Church of Christ minister who was born without any arms and has gone on to live a remarkably full life, defines being disabled differently. He says, “The disabled are those who fail to live up to their potential.” Louis Braille, by that definition, was not disabled.

We are to remember the words of Leviticus so that we do not put stumbling blocks or barriers in the way of anyone. We are learning in our society that the mobility-impaired, for example, are disabled only to the degree that barriers remain before their wheelchairs. The removal of barriers is a gift that we can offer others.

We learn from Jesus and from people like Louis Braille that healing often takes place by the removal of stumbling blocks.

And that’s what the paid message placed in the Wall Street Journal last Monday by the National Federation of the Blind was all about. It was reminding all of us not to put stumbling

blocks in the way of the blind, and in this case, especially the airlines. Instead of removing stumbling blocks, they felt new ones had been added.

The gist of the message was this: To those of you who have sight, we who are blind might seem to need different treatment, but let us decide that. Too often, we are not treated as individuals with the normal range of abilities and differences. We are rather treated as “the handicapped.” “We are treated like little children.” According to the ad, too many airlines have not been allowing passengers who are blind to sit in seats in exit rows. The airlines fear that in case of emergency, people without normal sight would not be able to function in necessary ways, or that they might get trampled by other passengers trying to get out.

However, those who are blind reply that they can get on and off the plane as quickly and easily as anyone else and further point out that if an emergency occurred at night and the cabin was dark or the occurrence of the emergency caused a smoke-filled cabin, a blind person unaccustomed to seeing could be at a greater advantage than a sighted person and could be of tremendous help to others.

What we forget is that all of us are blind in certain ways. We have our blind spots. We see the faults in others, for example, before we see them in ourselves. We are frequently blind to our own prejudices.

The good news of the gospel is that God sees all people as whole. Because someone is missing an arm or a leg or does not have the full use of his or her limbs or does not have sight or hearing in the same way that others do — that does not make that individual any less a whole person. It helps if we see people as God sees them. And many times it takes people like Louis Braille to help us all to see God and others in new ways. Amen.