Sunday, August 13, 1989
THE SEEING EYE
Luke 4:16-19, 11:34-36

According to the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus began his public ministry at about age 30, with the preaching of a sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, he took as the text for his sermon several verses from the Prophet Isaiah 61:1-2:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Notice especially the phrase, “The recovering of sight to the blind.” Jesus had a lot to say about the human eye and about blindness. For example, in another part of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying, “Your eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light; but when it is not sound, your body is full of darkness.”

Jesus frequently used “seeing” and the “eye” as metaphors for understanding or comprehension. Thus, it is not surprising that the healing of individuals who are blind is a familiar one in the gospels. The early church remembered such stories and wrote them down not only because of the act of physical healing, but also because they saw the healings of blindness as metaphors.

Clarity of vision is more than being able to see with one’s eyes the world around us. It also means possessing knowledge, having understanding, not being afraid of new ways of seeing things, that is, new ideas, and especially being able to understand and experience God in new ways.

In the Biblical tradition, people who are ignorant of God or refuse to know God are described as “living in the dark,” as being blind. That’s why Jesus used the metaphor, “The eye is the lamp of your body, when your eye is sound, your whole body is full of light; but when it is not sound, your body, that is, your whole self, is full of darkness.”

In our own language, we regularly use the images of sight and blindness, light and darkness as metaphors. We say, he or she “saw the light,” meaning that the individual came to a new understanding or a fresh awareness. Or we say, “that person is in the dark on that matter,” or say 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.” Yogi Berra said, “You can observe a lot just by watching.”

Thus, in the gospel stories, the healings of people who are blind are never recorded merely as acts of physical healing but carry, in addition, a broader meaning of coming to understand God and the creation in a new way. Jesus is understood as one who brings people from darkness into light, from blindness to sight. And that includes all of us. As one verse of a hymn we’re going to sing this morning puts it: “Once I was blind, but now I can see, the light of the world is Jesus.”

Perhaps Jesus talked about blindness so much because he experienced the fact that many people were blind to the true meaning of his ministry; blind to the kind of loving, forgiving God that he was trying to reveal to them.

For example, when Jesus returned to his hometown to preach in the synagogue, some people said, “Where did this Jesus get his wisdom? Is he not the carpenter’s son? We knew him as a boy and watched him grow up.” They were blind to what he was because of preconceived ideas about him.

Bernard Shaw, the 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.”

It happens all the time. People form a certain opinion of us in our personal or professional lives; and even though we grow, develop, and change, if they are asked to express an opinion of us, they are very apt to judge or evaluate us by what they knew of us in a very early stage of development. Unlike the tailor, they do not take a new measurement and thus are blind to what we have become.

As parents, we have the tendency to not take new measurements of our children as they grow and mature. We are tempted to think of them always as children who don’t know very much, who can’t make decisions. And children, as they grow up, are often blind to the fact that their parents have continued to grow and change and mature.

Blindness is widespread. I remember a story in the newspapers 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 IQ test on which the score was computed to be 69. “You are seriously retarded,” he was told.

But he refused to believe it. He went to see about getting some education, but again he was told 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 some time later, high school. With scholarships from the State Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, he finished four years of college at Kentucky State with a degree in sociology.

Later he carried a 4.0 straight A average in the University of Louisville graduate school and then began earning a good salary as Project Director for the Youth Service Bureau there, an agency that seeks to help keep young people 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?” To put people into rigid categories and keep them there is a form of blindness.

Jesus was just the opposite. He could see unlimited possibilities in people he met, potentialities that others could not see, and many times possibilities that the individuals he met could not even see in themselves.

Jesus changed many people’s lives because he saw in them possibilities that others did not see. Take Zacchaeus as one example.

When Jesus saw him up in the tree, he said, “Come down quickly, for I am going to stay at your house today. I want to eat at your table.” It was probably the first time in a long time that anyone had seen anything good in Zacchaeus. Others had only seen a short, little man, a tax collector, a cheat, a traitor.

The Bible doesn't tell us the conversation between Jesus and Zacchaeus when they had dinner together, but we do know that as a result, Zacchaeus was on the way to becoming a changed individual. He began to behave according to the best that was in him and not the worst. He promised to give half his wealth to the poor and also promised that if he had defrauded anyone, he would pay it back four times over.

Jesus was not blind to the best in people. He saw possibilities that others did not see in Peter and Andrew, James and John, Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, Martha, and in countless others.

The good news of the Christian faith is that just as Jesus did not judge Zacchaeus by his past, God does not judge us by what God knows of our past. Like the tailor, God takes a new measurement of each one of us all the time. God does not have the blind spots that we have. With God, there are always new beginnings and fresh starts.

In addition to not always seeing the best in others and in ourselves, what are some other forms of blindness prevalent among us?

We are often blind to the ways in which God works in our lives and in the lives of others and especially blind to some of the ways God may be working in the world through our enemies. We like to think that God works only through people who are the same as we are or who think in the same way as we think. Some, for example, think that God works only through the United States and in no other countries.

We are blind to some of our own faults and weaknesses. Thus, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us—"Why do you see the speck that is in another person's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" We have the tendency to see faults in others but to be blind to the same faults and weaknesses in ourselves.

We are frequently blind to new ideas, to new ways of doing things, and this blindness occurs in every field of endeavor. Twenty years before Louis Pasteur stated his theory of germ disease, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. in America and Ignaz Semmelweis in Vienna, had held that germs on doctors' 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.

Most of us are now aware of the suffering and tragedy which the blindness of prejudice has caused through the centuries. The blindness that teaches that people are 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 work and still does is similar in nature.

When Jesus said that God has sent him to bring the recovery of sight to the blind, these are some of the forms of blindness he was talking about.

And now for more 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, not afraid of new questions, who are open to mystery, who know 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, and transforming. That's a lot of what it means to be born

again. I believe God's creation is open and continues to evolve — thus there will always be a need to keep seeing things in new ways.

In his remarkable book, Coming of Age in the Milky Way, Timothy Ferris traces the history of how humankind has viewed the universe beginning with the ancient Sumerian, Chinese, and Korean astronomers, through the Egyptians who regarded the sky as a kind of tent canopy, supported by the mountains that marked the four corners of the earth, up through our present understanding of the cosmos. His survey only underscores the need to continue to be open to new ways of seeing God's creation and God's workings.

Seeing God and God's creation in new ways can 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 camouflaged 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 you look at the drawing. You wonder how you missed them before.

God's creation is filled with such hidden pictures which we can miss because of our blindness. But we can be healed.

Here's a short eye test for you which may help you determine whether or not you are being healed of your blindness.

Do you see, that is, understand God differently from what you did only a few years ago? Are you open to new ways of knowing God and discovering new ways of God working in the world and in your life?

Are you open to new ideas, new ways of doing things? Or do you find refuge in seeing things in the same old way? In other words, are you willing to examine your basic assumptions?

Are you willing to admit how little you know and to begin to understand that no matter how much we grow in knowledge and understanding, there is still mystery?

Having our blindness healed does not give us perfect sight. We know that there is always yet more truth to be discovered in God's creation. Amen.