Sunday, March 25, 1990
ARE WE ALSO BLIND?
John 9:

Her name was Elizabeth, and she was the most affirming person I've ever met. When I came to know her, she was a mature woman of thirty-five. She was one of those rare individuals who seemed to live in excitement about the possibilities of life. She had a way of seeing beauty where others missed it.

I asked her one day what gave her the ability to see things which others did not see. "Elizabeth," I said, "You always seem to be so excited about what you see and what you know you are going to see. Where does that come from?" She looked at me through her very thick glasses and said, "That's easy. I was born blind and unable to see anything until I was 15 years old. Since then, I can never get enough of seeing."

There are some similarities between Elizabeth and the unnamed man in the story from the Gospel of John, which we are considering today. Here, too, was a man born blind, and one day, because of meeting Jesus, he was given the gift of sight. His life was changed, and in some ways, he didn't expect.

Stories of Jesus healing people who are blind are numerous in the New Testament. The early church remembered these stories not only because of the act of physical healing but also because such stories carried deeper meanings. Clarity of vision is more than being able to see with one's eyes the world around us. It also means possessing knowledge and having understanding. In the Biblical tradition, people who are ignorant of God or who refuse to know God are described as living in the dark — they are blind.

In our own language, we frequently use the metaphors of sight and blindness, light and darkness. We say, "She saw the light," meaning that the individual came to a new understanding, a fresh awareness. And to indicate that we understand something, we often 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 and God's workings in new ways. 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 may 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. And as we shall see, this particular story has some other themes as well.

One theme is the question of the relationship, if any, between human disabilities or suffering and human sin. Jesus and his disciples find a man who is described as having been born blind. The disciples wonder if there is any connection between suffering and sin. "Who sinned," they ask, "this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

It's an intriguing question for speculation, but even if we knew the answer, it has no effect on whether or not the man will be healed.

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

In this case, part of the question was not even well thought out. If the cause of the man's blindness was his own sin, then since he had been 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.

As Christians, we make a mistake if we always assume a direct cause-and-effect relationship between disabilities and sin. Yet people continue to ask the question. A retarded child is born, and sometimes the parents and others ask, "What did we do to deserve this? Why is God punishing us?" There's nothing in the Christian faith that teaches that each calamity is the direct result of a particular identifiable sin, or that each disability comes as a punishment for some sin. Rather, Jesus said, "God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust."

In this case, Jesus answered the disciples' question by saying: "It was not that this man or his parents sinned that he was born blind, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him."

Another theme in this story, which is different from other stories of healing, is that Jesus acts on his own initiative in healing the man's blindness and not in response to the blind man's request or faith. The man's faith follows rather than precedes healing. There are times when healing takes place within us as an unanticipated and surprise gift, as something we didn't ask for or ever expect.

A third theme in the story is the blindness of others who believe they can see clearly. Some simply refused to accept the fact that this man, born blind, was the same man who now could see.

Others refused to accept the fact that Jesus healed the man. Still, others criticized Jesus for healing the man on the Sabbath.

There are always those among us who have trouble considering anything new, no matter what the evidence. Some people seem to be born with closed minds. There are people who haven't been open to a fresh or new idea 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 look at any new evidence on any subject. Some even say, "Even though I've seen it with my own eyes, I refuse to believe it."

Institutions can be blind as well as individuals. All the world knows of the pressure the Church exerted on Galileo to force him to recant what the church called his false and heretical opinion that the earth was not the center of the universe and that the planets revolved around the sun instead. Two hundred years later, the chemical manufacture of 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.

Consider the suffering and tragedy that the blindness of prejudice has caused through the centuries. The blindness that 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.

Medical science has its own kind of blindness. Twenty years before Pasteur stated his theory of germ-caused disease, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. in the United States and Ignaz Semmelweis in Vienna were claiming that germs on doctors' hands caused death in childbirth and surgery. All they wanted physicians to do was to wash their hands before doing surgery or examining their patients. 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.

"Are we also blind?" the Pharisees asked Jesus. For them, it was a rhetorical question. But it should have been a question that they and we seriously ask ourselves.

The truth is, we all have our own kinds of blindness or blind spots, and being healed of them is not always easy for us.

We resist being healed of our blindness because we are so comfortable with our old way of seeing and doing things. We don't want to be confused with new knowledge and facts. Then we would have to rearrange all of our thinking. It's difficult to question our old assumptions. 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.

Why is it that we are afraid of new knowledge? Some of our so-called "old sayings" underscore an anti-knowledge stance. "What you don't know can't hurt you." That's nonsense. Another saying is: "Ignorance is bliss." That's like saying, "Better to remain blind than to see."

As a matter of fact, the man in this story who was healed no doubt thought at several points that it would have been better to stay blind because other people did not accept him very well after he was healed. In his case, the gift of sight caused him trouble that he had not expected.

According to the story in John's Gospel, Jesus first anointed the man's eyes with clay, which he had made from his spittle mixed with the clay, and then Jesus told him to go wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam. So he went and washed and came back seeing. But when he returned, Jesus had gone.

Jesus's absence was no picnic. Being blessed by God is no picnic. In fact, the man born blind could have said understandably to himself more than once, "I never asked to be healed. If this is what it means to be blessed by God, I think I am willing to relinquish some divine favors." He discovered that the good deed done to him now was causing him trouble. I think it was Nietzsche who said, "No good deed goes unpunished." In this case, it was not Jesus, the doer of the deed, who was being punished, but the one who received the gift.

This story indicates, as do some other Biblical stories, the truth of repeated experience: God's favor more often leads into rather than away from difficulties. A relationship with God does not remove one from but often places one in the line of fire. Those who preach faith as the cessation of pain, suffering, poverty, restless nights, and turbulent days are offering false comfort.

Here's what happened to the healed man in the absence of Jesus.

After he was healed, he went home, but was not accepted there anymore. So radical was the change in him that his reappearance in the old neighborhood generated no joy, no celebration, no welcome home — only criticisms, questions, and doubts. Why was it that his old friends and neighbors had so much difficulty being happy with his good fortune? Why is it that we have so much trouble rejoicing with the good news of others?

The man who was no longer blind insisted that he was the same person, yet he was not accepted. He was formerly well known among these people; his stumbling and hesitant walk, his dependence, his poverty were his identity; they defined his place in the community. Now he walked upright, assured of place and direction, quite independent, only to discover that he had no place anymore. He had broken out of his mold, and people didn't like it. We want people to stay in their place.

Remember not too long ago when women were becoming truck drivers, physicians, attorneys, ministers, business executives, governors, police officers, firefighters — a lot of people had trouble accepting it. "Women should stay in their place," they said. We don't like it when people become something different from what we had always thought they were.

The healed man's troubles were not over. He was hauled before the religious authorities. They were interested in all reported miracles, especially if performed by unauthorized individuals, and most especially if done in violation of some law. In this case, the healing took place on the Sabbath. How could this be? If the man was truly healed, it was done by someone with the power of God, but if the healing took place on the Sabbath, then it was done by someone opposing God's law. The religious authorities could not conceive of God working in any other way than by their own definitions.

The religious authorities next questioned the man's parents: "Is this your son?"

"Yes." "Was he born blind?" "Yes." "How is it then that he can now see?" "We do not know what happened to him." "We do not know who healed him." Whatever joy the parents felt was now drowned in fear. They could be expelled from the synagogue, and social disgrace is a high price to pay for having a son especially blessed by God.

The religious authorities questioned the healed man a second time. Faced with irrefutable evidence of the healing, they tried to make him denounce Jesus as a sinner. He refused, and the healed man was denounced along with Jesus and expelled from the community as a sinner. A few days earlier, the man's life was blessed by Jesus. Now his old friends disregard him, his parents reject him, and he is no longer welcome at his old place of worship.

The good news is that the story ends with the healed man becoming a follower of Jesus. His whole life was changed. He was healed of more than physical blindness. In spite of the trouble it caused him, he would not have traded his sight for his old way of living.

The story also ends with a final question for each one of us. And that question is the one that the religious authorities asked Jesus: "Are we also blind?" In their case, they couldn't admit their blindness and so couldn't be healed. In what ways are you blind? And are you willing to be healed, knowing the changes it will bring to your life? Amen.