Sunday, January 22, 1995
A NEW KIND OF VISION
Luke 4:14-21

According to the story in Luke's gospel, when Jesus, at about age thirty, began his public ministry 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 the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Note especially the phrase, "The recovering of sight to the blind." Jesus had much to say about the human eye and the kinds of blindness that can affect us. 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 whole body will suffer."

Here, as in other places, Jesus used "the eye" and "seeing" as metaphors for understanding and for the kind of inner vision that can guide us in the right way, or the lack of inner vision that can give us no guidance at all.

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, told them over and over again, and wrote them down, not only because of the physical act of healing but also because they understood the healing of blindness as a metaphor.

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

In the Biblical tradition, people who are ignorant of God, refuse to know God, or are unwilling to grow in their knowledge and understanding of God and God's creation are described as "living in the dark," as being "blind." That's why Jesus used the metaphor, "The eye is the lamp of the 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 fresh awareness. Or we say, "That person is in the dark on that matter," or that "someone has kept us in the dark," or "that someone has shown us the light." In conversation, we frequently say to indicate that we understand, "I see." Yogi Berra famously said, "You can observe a lot by watching."

In the gospel stories, the healing of people who are blind is never recorded merely as acts of physical healing but carries, 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. We speak of people as having "blind spots." There's an old hymn that includes the phrase, "Once I was blind, but now I see, the light of the world is Jesus."

I think 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.

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 little boy and watched him grow up.” They were blind to what he had become because of preconceived ideas about him.

My favorite statement about this tendency, which is present in all of us, is what George Bernard Shaw 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, they are very apt to judge or evaluate us by what they knew of us in a very early stage of development. Unlike Shaw’s tailor, they do not take a new measurement and thus are blind to what we have become.

As parents, we sometimes fail to take new measurements of our children as they grow and mature. We take physical measurements but not other kinds. 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 sometimes blind to the fact that their parents continue to grow, change, and mature.

Blindness is widespread. There was a story in the newspaper 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 he scored 69. “You are seriously retarded,” he was told.

Fortunately, he refused to believe it. He went to see about getting an education but was again 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 eighth grade and 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 have to stop categorizing people. These people made a mistake. If that happened to me, how many other young people have had the same thing done to them?” To put people into rigid categories and keep them there is a form of blindness.

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

He changed people's lives because of this lack of blindness. Zacchaeus is one of my favorite examples. 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 seen only a short little man, a tax collector, a cheat, a traitor.

The Bible story does not give us the details of 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 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 — and there are no secrets from God. 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 where God's power can bring us recovery of sight?

We can be 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 through those we perceive as our enemies. We like to think that God works only through people who are like us or who think in the same way as we do.

For me, it is helpful to be always looking for new ways of understanding God, new metaphors. Last week, for example, a minister colleague of mine told me about a conversation he had with someone who said to him in talking about God, "The trouble with you is you've never been a prizefighter." He said, "What do you mean?" His friend said, "You've got the Referee and the Trainer mixed. God's not the Referee. God's your trainer. God's in your corner working for you, whispering in your ear, wiping your brow, and pushing you back into the fight. God's not about judging you." For me, that's another very helpful way of understanding how God works in my life and in your life.

Another form of blindness in some of us is that we are blind to some of our own faults and weaknesses. 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 in your own eye?" We have the tendency to see faults in others but be blind to the same faults and weaknesses in ourselves.

In addition, some of us are blind to new ideas, to new ways of doing things, and this blindness occurs in every field of activity. Twenty years before Louis Pasteur stated his theory of bacterial disease, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. in America and Ignaz Semmelweis in Vienna had held that bacteria 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 that 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, their ethnic background, or their gender has caused more innocent suffering than almost any other kind of blindness.

When Jesus said that God had sent him to bring the recovery of sight to the blind, these are some of the forms of blindness he was talking about. On the positive side, he was talking about having a new kind of vision.

And now for more good news. When we are open to a new vision, to new ideas and new ways of understanding God and the world, 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 question their basic assumptions. 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, to having a new vision.

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 underscores the need to continue to be open to new ways of seeing God's creation and God's workings.

Seeing God, God's creation, and human beings as a part of that creation in new ways can be compared to the discovery of "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 that 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 that we can miss because of our blindness. But we can be healed.

Here are some simple steps that you can take in your own sight recovery program with God's help.

First, remember that according to the Bible, God has made creation and all of us in God's image. Look for the image of God every day. God's image can be found in the cat who awakens you in the morning, the birds who sing on the fence, the flowers that spread their fragrance over the garden, the child playing in the schoolyard, the homeless woman or man who fumbles for aluminum cans — all are created in the image of God.

Second, bring peace to every meeting with another. Medical doctor Gerald Jampolsky wrote a book a few years ago called Love Is Letting Go of Fear. In it, he asked this question: "Have you ever given yourself the opportunity of going through just one day concentrating on totally accepting everyone and making no judgments?"

Try not keeping score of wrongs for one day. Dr. Jampolsky adds, “Everything we think, say, or do reacts on us like a boomerang. When we send out judgments in the form of criticism, fury, or other attack thoughts, they come back to us. When we send out only love, it comes back to us.”

A man named Carl Coleman was driving to work one morning when he bumped fenders with another motorist. Both cars stopped, and the woman driving the other car got out to survey the damage. She was distraught. It was her fault, she admitted, and hers was a new car, less than two days from the showroom. She dreaded facing her husband. Coleman was sympathetic, but he had to pursue the exchange of license and registration data. She reached into her glove compartment to retrieve the documents, which were in an envelope. On the first paper to tumble out, written in her husband’s distinctive handwriting, were these words: “In case of accident, remember Honey, it’s you I love, not the car.” Amen.