Sunday, March 17, 1996
A BLIND MAN'S JOURNEY
John 9:1-41

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 others did not. "Elizabeth," I said, "you always seem excited about what you see and what you know you're going to see. Where does that come from?" She looked at me through her thick glasses and said, "That's easy. I was born blind and unable to see anything until I was six 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 we are considering today. He, too, was a person born blind, and one day, because of meeting Jesus, he is given the gift of sight. His life was changed in ways he didn't expect.

Stories of Jesus healing people who were blind are numerous in the New Testament. The early church remembered these stories not only because of the physical act of healing but also because they carried deeper meanings. Clarity of vision is more than being able to see with one's eyes; it also means possessing knowledge and understanding. In the biblical tradition, people who choose to remain ignorant of God or refuse to see God at work are described as living in the dark — they are blind.

In our own language, we frequently use metaphors of sight and blindness, light and darkness. We say, "She saw the light," meaning that the individual came to a new understanding, a change of perception. And to indicate 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." These gospel stories have a message for all of us. Even though we may have the gift of sight with our eyes, we can be blind in other ways. Perhaps we all need to be healed of some form of blindness.

The journey of this particular blind man is especially instructive, as is the blindness of the people who knew him — some of whom chose to remain blind, even though they could see with their eyes.

There are several themes to explore in this story. One is the question of the relationship between human disabilities or suffering and our sinfulness. Jesus and his disciples meet a man who is described as having been born blind. The disciples wonder if there is any connection between his lack of sight and sin. "Who sinned," they ask, "this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

It's an intriguing question, but no matter what the answer, it has no effect on whether or not the man will be healed.

In this case, it's also an irrelevant question because it's based on a wrong assumption — namely, that someone's sin is always the cause of any disability or suffering. Sometimes sin could 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 man's blindness was caused by his own sin, then, since he had been born blind, he must have sinned while still in his mother's womb. How is it possible to sin before you are born?

Furthermore, there is no evidence in the teachings of Jesus that there is always a direct cause-and-effect relationship between disability and sin. Yet we continue to ask the question. A child is born with a disability, and perhaps the parents or others ask, "What did we do to deserve this? Why is God punishing us?" There's nothing in the Christian faith that teaches each calamity is the result of a particular sin or that every disability comes as punishment for 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, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him."

Another theme in the story, different from other stories of healing, is that Jesus acts on his own initiative to heal the man's blindness — not in response to the blind man's request or faith. There he is, minding his own tin-cup business, when the light of the world comes along and opens his eyes, shoving him into the spotlight where people stand in line to question him. Where is the man who did it? How could he do that? What did he do to you? What do you say about him since he opened your eyes? Not one person says, "Thanks be to God." No one asks him what it's like to see for the first time or whether the light hurt his eyes. This man's faith follows rather than precedes his healing. It is after he is healed that his journey to faith begins. There are times when healing takes place within us as an unanticipated surprise gift, something we didn't ask for or expect.

The third and main theme in the story is the blindness of others, who believe they can see clearly. Some refused to accept that the man who could now see was the same man who had been born blind. Still others refused to accept that Jesus healed him. And others criticized Jesus for healing the man on the Sabbath.

There are always those among us who have trouble considering anything new, no matter the evidence. Some people seem to be born with closed minds. I know people who haven't been willing to consider a 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 in the same way 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 theory that the earth was not the center of the universe and that the planets revolved around the sun. Later in history, the chemical manufacture of diamonds was delayed for decades

because a brilliant chemist was forced to recant and declare publicly that he had 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 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 (what we now call bacteria) on doctors' hands caused infection and often death in surgery. All they wanted physicians to do was wash their hands before surgery or examining 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?" asked the critics of Jesus. For them, it was a rhetorical question, but it should have been a serious question for them and for us.

The truth is, we all have our own kinds of blindness or blind spots, and the journey from blindness to sight is not always an easy one. We resist being healed of our blindness because we are so comfortable with our old ways of seeing and doing things. We don't want to be confused with new facts and knowledge. We would have to rearrange all our thinking.

Furthermore, overcoming our blindness can cause problems we hadn't anticipated. The man in the story who was healed no doubt thought at several points that it would have been better to stay blind because people did not accept him readily after he was healed. The gift of sight caused him trouble he had not expected.

A relationship with God doesn't remove us from difficulties but often places us directly in the line of fire. Those who preach faith as the cessation of pain, suffering, poverty, restless nights, and turbulent days offer false comfort. Consider what happened to this man on his journey from blindness to sight, from doubt to belief. After he was healed, he went home but was no longer accepted. His neighbors knew how to deal with him as a blind man but not as someone who could now see.

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 did his friends and neighbors have so much difficulty rejoicing at his good fortune? Why is it that we often find it hard to celebrate the good in others?

Jesus healed him and then disappeared, leaving him to face the critics alone. He now had to make sense of what happened to him and decide what he would say in the face of enormous opposition.

Being blessed by God doesn't remove all problems or opposition. He could understandably have said to himself, "I never asked to be healed. If this is what it means to be blessed by God, I think I'm willing to relinquish some divine favors." He discovered that the good deed done to him now made him the center of controversy. I think it was Nietzsche who said, "No good deed goes unpunished."

This story, like other biblical stories, reveals a truth: God's favor often leads us into difficult situations rather than away from them.

The man's troubles didn't end. He was hauled before the religious authorities, who were interested in all reported miracles, especially if they were performed by unauthorized individuals or if they violated the law. In this case, the healing took place on the Sabbath. How could this be? If the man was truly healed, it had to be by the power of God, but if the healing occurred on the Sabbath, it must have been done by someone working against God's rules. The critics couldn't conceive of God working in any way other than their own definitions. They believed it was their job to decide whether or not this healing was an authentic act of God.

This shouldn't surprise us. We, too, can become anxious about whether or not something should be ascribed to God or whether a group different from us is doing God's work.

A devout homemaker in Conyers, Georgia, is drying her hands at the kitchen sink when she looks out the window and sees the Virgin Mary in her backyard. Is it God or not? A Lakota medicine man performs a healing service for a seminarian with lymphoma, and the cancer goes away. Is it God or not?

There are many astounding things that happen in the world that may not have anything to do with the power of God. They may only have to do with the power of the human imagination or suggestion (although God can certainly work through both), or worse yet, with outright deception. What if something isn't of God, and we believe that it is?

The story of this blind man suggests another question, equally important: Not "What if it isn't God, and I believe it is?" but rather, "What if it is God, and I believe it isn't?" That is the one question the critics of this healing forgot to ask, and it's the question we often forget to ask. They were so sure of everything — that God did not work on the Sabbath, that Moses was God's only spokesman, that anyone born blind must be a sinner (and anyone who broke the Sabbath as well), that God didn't work through sinners, and that no one could teach them anything.

The good news is that the story ends with the healed man becoming a follower of Jesus. He was healed of more than physical blindness. The story poses a crucial question for each of us, the one the religious authorities asked Jesus: "Are we also blind?"

Every time journeys like this one repeat themselves in our time, we have the opportunity to be critics — or we can say, "Thanks be to God for working in ways we hadn't even considered." Amen.