Sunday, January 25, 1998
HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?
Luke 4:14-21

Here is the cleaned-up version of your text:

In the broadest sense of the term, “seeing” is more than just having the physical capability of good eyesight. It has been said, for example, that “we do not see things as they are, but we see things as we are.” In other words, we see not only with our eyes and through the signals sent to the brain for interpretation, but also through our assumptions, preconceptions, prejudices, and knowledge of the object we are observing.

A pathologist studying a biopsy of human tissue under a microscope will be able to determine whether or not cancer is present. A person not trained in that field wouldn’t even know what to look for.

Our attitude, our outlook on life, also influences what we see and how we interpret it. A pessimist observes life differently than an optimist. If you have a glass half-filled with water, some will see it as half full, and others as half empty. However, recently I learned there is a third choice: you could also see the glass as being too large. When there are clouds in the sky on a sunny day, you can describe it as being partly cloudy or partly sunny.

In our day-to-day conversation, we use the “eye” and “seeing” as metaphors for understanding or not understanding. 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 subject,” meaning they do not comprehend. We indicate that we understand what someone is saying to us with the comment, “I see.”

In the same way, Jesus used the eye and seeing as metaphors for understanding or not understanding. The prophets in the Old Testament did the same.

According to the story in Luke’s Gospel, when Jesus began his public ministry by preaching a sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, he took as the text for his sermon several verses from 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 recovery 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 recovery of sight to the blind.” This is primarily the language of metaphor. Jesus spoke often about the human eye and the kinds of blindness that can affect us. While it’s true that Jesus healed people of physical blindness, he also knew that many of us are blind in other ways. 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.” The way you view the world affects how you act in the world. If you see people as enemies, you will tend to treat them as enemies.

Thus, it is not surprising that the healing of blindness is a familiar theme in the Gospels. The early church remembered those stories and retold them, not only because of the physical healing but also because they understood the healing of blindness as a metaphor.

In the same way, when Jesus said that he had come to "proclaim release to the captives and to let the oppressed go free," these statements were remembered and written down because of their metaphorical power. Most of us are captives and oppressed in one way or another.

Clarity of vision is more than being able to see the world around us with our eyes. It also means possessing knowledge, having understanding, and, even more important, not being afraid of new ways of seeing things. It means not being held captive to outdated concepts.

In the Biblical tradition, people who are ignorant of God or refuse to be open to knowing God, or who are unwilling to grow in their knowledge and understanding, are described as "living in the dark" or as being "blind."

In a similar vein, modern communication theory holds that individuals self-censor or filter their intake of information to shield their beliefs and practices from attack while at the same time seeking out information and arguments that support their beliefs and practices. If you tend to be conservative in your political views, you will more likely read books and newspaper columns that are conservative. If you are liberal, you will more likely read books and columns with a liberal outlook.

I think Jesus talked about blindness so much because he experienced how many people were blind to the true meaning of his ministry. They were blind to the kind of loving, forgiving God he was trying to reveal to them. Many had a different concept of God, and it's not easy to change those concepts.

When Jesus finished his first sermon in his hometown synagogue, Luke reports that the people were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth, but at the same time, they refused to re-examine their assumptions about him. They said, "We knew him as a little boy and watched him grow up. Then he became a carpenter. He's nothing special." They were unwilling to reassess their views.

My favorite illustration of this kind of blindness, which is present in all of us, comes from what George Bernard Shaw said about his tailor: "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 continue to judge us based on what they knew of us at an earlier stage. Unlike Shaw's tailor, they do not take new measurements and are blind to who we have become.

As parents, we sometimes fail to take new measurements of our children as they grow and mature. We measure them physically but not always in other ways. We may still think of them as children and are blind to some of the new abilities and habits they've developed, both good and bad.

Similarly, as children grow up, they can be 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 Hispanic woman who had been told at age 15 that she was “retarded.” She was in prison and had been given an IQ test with a score of 68. “You are seriously retarded,” she was told.

Fortunately, she refused to believe it. She sought an education, but again was told that she wasn’t bright enough. Not to be put down, at age 15, she started third grade. In weeks, she had finished eighth grade and then, sometime later, high school. With scholarships, she completed college with a degree in sociology.

Later, she carried a 4.0 GPA in graduate school and began earning a good salary as a social worker with an agency that helps keep young people out of trouble.

“What it proves to me,” she said, “is that we have to stop categorizing people. These people made a mistake in judging me. 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 couldn’t see, and many times possibilities that individuals could not even see in themselves. That’s what all good leaders and teachers still do.

He changed people’s lives because of his willingness to take new measurements. 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 saw only a short little man, a tax collector, a cheat, and a traitor.

The Bible doesn’t give us the details of the conversation between Zacchaeus and Jesus, but we do know that as a result, Zacchaeus was on his way to becoming a changed individual. He began to behave according to the best in him, not the worst. He promised to give half his wealth to the poor and to repay anyone he had defrauded four times over.

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

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 new measurements 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.

Not only are we sometimes blind to the best in others and ourselves, we can also be blind to the ways God works in our lives and in the lives of others. We tend to be especially blind to how God might be working in and through those we perceive as enemies. We often think that God works only through people who are like us, who think as we do, or belong to the same church.

I’m always searching for new metaphors in thinking and talking about God. A few weeks ago, a friend of mine shared a conversation she had with someone who said, “The trouble with you is you’ve never seen a prizefighter.” She asked, “What do you mean?” Her friend replied, “You’ve

got the referee and the trainer mixed up. God's not the referee. God's your trainer. God's in your corner working for you, whispering in your ear, wiping your brow, encouraging you to go back into the ring. God's not about judging you." When she shared this with me, it gave me another helpful way of understanding how God works in my life and yours.

It's also possible that some of us are blind to our own faults and weaknesses. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us, "Why do you see the speck in another person's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" There's always a temptation to see faults in others but be blind to the same faults in ourselves.

Blindness occurs in every area of life. Twenty years before Louis Pasteur proposed his theory of bacterial disease, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. in the United States and Ignaz Semmelweis in Austria suggested that bacteria on doctors' hands caused infection and death in childbirth and surgery. Both had their ideas scorned by peers.

We are all aware of the suffering caused by the blindness of prejudice. The assumption that people are inferior or superior based on the color of their skin, their ethnicity, or gender has caused more innocent suffering than almost anything else.

When Jesus said that God had sent him to "proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind," these are the issues he was talking about.

Half-empty or half-full? Maybe the glass is too large. Life becomes exciting when we search for other options, when we are open to new ideas and visions, new ways of understanding God and the world. The happiest people I know are those who are not afraid of the unknown, not afraid of new questions, who are open to mystery, willing to consider new evidence, and who know they don't have a corner on the truth.

I believe God's creation is open and continues to evolve, thus there will always be a need for being willing to see things in new ways. When we do that, we are living according to the image of God in which we were created. Amen.