Sunday, March 14, 1999
UNRECOGNIZED BLINDNESS
John 9:1-41

It's possible to be physically blind and not be aware of it. If you were born blind and no one ever told you that you were blind, how would you know it? I suppose this is rarely, if ever, true of physical blindness, but it is true of other kinds of blindness. We can be blind in certain ways and not be aware of it. When I was learning to drive a truck on the farm many years ago, the first thing my dad taught me was that in using rearview mirrors there are blind spots. Later, I learned about other blind spots in my life.

There are a number of stories in the New Testament about people who are blind and are given sight by Jesus. The early church remembered such stories, told them to each other, and then wrote them down not only because of the physical act of healing but also because such stories carried a deeper meaning.

Clarity of vision is more than being able to see with one's eyes. It's also a metaphor for possessing knowledge, having understanding, being sensitive to one another, and being open to the working of God in one's life and in the world. In the language of the Bible, people who are ignorant of God, refuse to know God, or think they know everything there is to know about God and how God works, are described as being blind — and worse yet, they don't recognize their blindness.

In our own language, we sometimes use the metaphor of sight and blindness. We say, "She saw the light," meaning that the individual came to a new understanding, a change of perception. To indicate we understand something, we say, "I see. I see."

The point is that in the gospel stories, miracles of the healing of the blind are never recorded only as acts of physical healing, but carry, in addition, a broader meaning of coming to understand God and God's workings.

One day, Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. What can we learn from this story about our own kinds of blindness?

First of all, like the disciples, we often ask the wrong question about the causes of blindness in others and in ourselves. Their first question was, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" It's an interesting question for speculation, but no matter what the answer, it has no effect on whether or not the man will be healed.

It's also 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 there is not always a direct cause-and-effect relationship.

In this case, if the cause of the man's blindness was his own sin, then, since he was born blind, he must've sinned while still in his mother's womb. How is it possible to sin before you are born?

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 retarded child is born, and we ask, "What did we do wrong to deserve this?" or "Why is God punishing us?"

Sometimes we mistakenly believe it's because we didn't say our prayers regularly or neglected some other religious practices.

Notice I said there is no evidence in the teachings of Jesus that there is ALWAYS a direct cause-and-effect relationship between disabilities or birth defects and sin. There are situations in which our sin or neglect could be the cause. We know now, for example, that good prenatal care is crucial. A pregnant woman who smokes, uses certain kinds of drugs, or drinks alcohol can cause problems for the child in the womb. In the same way, if we neglect our own physical health through bad habits, lack of exercise, or improper diet, we can cause problems for ourselves.

On the other hand, there are bad things that happen to us in life for which there is no apparent cause. Jesus said, "God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust, and the sun to shine on the evil and the good."

In this case of the man who had been born blind, Jesus said, "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."

The second point this story makes for us is that sometimes healing comes for whatever kind of problem we might have, even though we didn't specifically ask for it.

In this story, Jesus acts on his own initiative in healing the man's blindness, not in response to a specific request for healing. There he is, this man born blind, 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. He didn't ask for this kind of publicity or criticism.

The critics want to know — who did it? How did it happen? What did he do to you? Are you sure you were blind? The critics did not believe him until they called his parents and asked them, "Is this your son? Was he born blind? How is it that he can now see?" Not one living soul said, "Thanks be to God." No one asked him what it was like to see for the first time or whether the light hurt his eyes.

This man's faith follows rather than precedes healing. It is after he is healed that his journey to faith begins. There are times in our lives when healing takes place within us as an unanticipated surprise gift, as something we didn't ask for or expect.

The third point in this story, which connects to each one of our lives, is that many of us are blind in ways in which we are not aware. There are many people in this story who are sure they can see everything clearly but yet are blind.

Some simply refused to accept that this man who could now see was the same man who had been born blind. There were others who refused to accept the fact that Jesus healed him. And still, others could only criticize Jesus for healing the man on the Sabbath.

There are so many forms of unrecognized blindness among us. Last week I was reading about a man who stopped by his minister's office in the church to tell her that he had had a kind of "born-again" religious experience. "You've had what?" she asked. "Yes," he said, "Last week I visited my brother-in-law's church, and I don't know what it was, but something happened, and I have a new awareness of God." "That can't have happened to you," she said, "You're a

Congregationalist." He was filled with joy, but she was filled with skepticism. Why? Because spiritual renewal is wonderful as long as it occurs within what we consider acceptable channels and does not threaten our understanding of God.

That's a kind of unrecognized blindness in many of us. We are blind to the way God works if it doesn't fit our preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs.

Many of us are also blind to our own weaknesses. And there are those who are blind to the talents, abilities, and skills of others. We can even be blind to some of the abilities of our own children. Some of us are blind to our own special skills and abilities — they have to be pointed out to us. There are those who are blind to other people's hurts and problems.

Tommy LaSorda is quoted as saying, "When you tell other people your problems, 80 percent don't want to hear about them, and the other 20 percent are glad you have them."

Some people are blind to considering anything new or different, no matter what the evidence. There are those who seem to have been born with closed minds. I know people who have not been willing to consider a new idea since birth.

Others of us are not blind from birth, but develop unrecognized forms of blindness 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 have forms of unrecognized blindness. 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. In spite of the evidence, the church continued to teach that everything in the universe revolved around the earth instead of the planets in our solar system revolving around the sun.

Consider the suffering and tragedy which the blindness of racial prejudice has caused through the centuries. The blindness that teaches that one group of people is inferior or superior because of the color of their skin has caused more innocent suffering than almost any other kind of blindness. For example, it wasn't too many years ago when black people were not allowed to play on professional sports teams.

"Are we also blind?" asked the critics of Jesus after he had healed the man born blind. Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But because you say, 'we see,' your sin remains." Unrecognized blindness is the problem.

For them, it was a rhetorical question, but it's a relevant question for each one of us to ask because we all have unrecognized blindness. Worse still, we resist being healed of our blindness because we are so content with our old way of seeing and doing things. We don't want to be bothered with new facts and knowledge. We would have to rearrange all of our thinking.

Furthermore, being healed of whatever kinds of blindness we have can cause other problems for us that we hadn't anticipated. The man in the story that Jesus healed no doubt wondered whether or not it would've been better to stay blind because the people around him did not accept him in the same way after he was healed. The gift of sight had unintended consequences for him.

Jesus healed him and then was gone, leaving him to face the critics all alone. He now had to try to make some sense out of what happened to him, and he had to decide what to say about it in the face of enormous opposition. He did not know all the correct religious phrases with which to interpret his salvation. All he knew for sure was that heretofore he sat in darkness and now his whole world was filled with light.

What this tells us is that being blessed by God does not take away all problems or opposition. This man would've said to himself more than once, "I didn't ask to be healed. If this is what it means to be blessed of God, I think I am willing to relinquish some divine favors." The good deed done to him had now caused him to be the center of a controversy. As Nietzsche said, "No good deed goes unpunished."

After he went home, he was not accepted as before. His neighbors knew how to deal with him as a blind man, but not as a person with sight. His reappearance in his old neighborhood generated little joy, no celebration, only criticism and doubt. 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 difficulty rejoicing at the good fortune of others? Why is it that we are so cynical about changes for the good in others? We don't always like it when people become something different from what they had always been, even when it has changed them for the better.

- Here's a short eye test for growing Christians to help you recognize and maybe be healed of some of your unrecognized blindness.

- Are you open to considering that God might work in ways that you had not heretofore imagined?

- Are you willing to acknowledge that God loves your enemies as much as God loves you?

- Are you willing to re-examine your assumptions about people you are having difficulty with so that you can see them in a different light? God might be working through them in ways you hadn't considered.

Amen.