Sunday, June 6, 1999
VISION DEFICIT DISORDER
Matthew 9:9-13,18-26

The time we live in is one full of all kinds of "disorders." For example, I hear more and more about children and young people being diagnosed with "Attention Deficit Disorder." As I understand it, such individuals have difficulty sitting still for long periods, concentrating on one thing, or focusing on a particular problem.

People who attend church services tell me that when listening to sermons, they sometimes experience "attention deficit disorder." It could be their problem, the preacher's problem, or a little of both. I know that when delivering a sermon or listening to one, it works best if the congregation and the preacher finish at the same time.

In this age of "disorders," I've come up with my own list.

I know people who have "priority deficit disorder." They have trouble establishing priorities in their lives. They lack a sense of purpose. They don't know what to put first or, worse, they put the wrong things first — sometimes without even realizing it.

I also know people who have "character deficit disorder." They lack character. Some of the qualities that make up character are courage, discipline, and integrity. A person who doesn't have "character deficit disorder" is someone you can trust.

Another type of disorder is "gratitude deficit disorder." These people don't have an ounce of thankfulness in their lives. They are never grateful for anything they have because they are always wanting more. Once in a while, they might grudgingly express gratitude, but it hurts them to do so.

Related to this is "joy deficit disorder." These people are never joyful but always complaining. Another related disorder is "faith deficit disorder." Maybe in the future, I'll do a series of sermons on these various disorders.

You can consider today's sermon on "Vision Deficit Disorder" to be the first in that series. When the next one will be scheduled, I don't yet know. You can call that a "scheduling deficit disorder."

What do I mean by "vision deficit disorder?" People with this disorder have tunnel vision. They can't see the broader picture. They can't see the forest for the trees. They have a narrow view of life. They tend to put everything and everyone in little boxes or rigid categories. They wouldn't dare color outside the lines. They refuse to re-examine their basic assumptions. They resist change — even when it's for the good. They prefer things as they are. They have no vision of a better future.

I know people with vision deficit disorder in their understanding of God. Even though they are mature adults, they still have a 4th-grade understanding and vision of God.

There are also people who have vision deficit disorder in terms of how they see themselves. They see themselves as insignificant, lacking gifts or talents, or unable to grow and learn. They believe they are unacceptable — even to God.

In the story from the Gospel of Matthew read earlier, we see people with all these types of "vision deficit disorder." Here's what happened: Jesus invited individuals to become His disciples. One man He called to follow Him was a tax collector named Matthew. To everyone's surprise, Matthew accepted the invitation. People with vision deficit disorder would never have expected this. Once a sinner, always a sinner. People don't change.

Then Jesus went to a dinner party at Matthew's house, where many tax collectors and sinners were eating together. When the critics of Jesus heard about it, they complained to the disciples: "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Their vision deficit disorder continued. In their view, God was only interested in people like them. They had a narrow, limited view of God's love and grace. Jonah, in the Old Testament, had this kind of vision deficit disorder — he couldn't understand why God would care about the people of Nineveh.

Jesus tried to correct their vision deficit disorder. When He heard what happened, He said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." In other words, He was telling them that they needed a larger vision of God.

Later in the story, we see another example of vision deficit disorder, and how a woman had the courage to overcome it. A leader of the synagogue asked Jesus to come to his house to heal his daughter. On the way, a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak. She thought, "If I only touch His cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, saw her, and said, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well." Instantly, the woman was healed.

What the story doesn't tell us, because everyone at the time would already know it, is that a woman in her condition was considered unclean, an outcast, untouchable. I believe she had come to see herself the same way. Until the day she encountered Jesus, she had given up all hope. She believed she was incurable, condemned to a lifetime of suffering and pain. Worse still, she might have thought that God was punishing her for some unknown sin. Many people still think this way when they face difficult problems — it's a type of vision deficit disorder.

I also believe this woman was becoming more and more depressed. Her sense of self-worth was nearly depleted. She was convinced no one cared to help her. If only someone would pay attention to her, if only someone would treat her as a human being instead of a person with a problem. I imagine she had tried to make friends but found it difficult because of her shyness.

Then one day, she heard the rumors about a new teacher and healer coming to her area. She figured the least she could do was stand at the edge of the crowd and try to catch a glimpse of this person. Maybe she could even get close enough to touch Him. This was her first step toward correcting her vision deficit disorder.

The crowd was larger than she expected. She could sense something different about this man. Overcoming her shyness, she decided she had to get closer. She worked her way through the crowd, and the closer she got to Jesus, the more convinced she became that He could help her in ways no one else could. If only she could touch Him, that would be enough. Timidly, with fear and faith, she stretched out her hand and touched His cloak. It was as if she had touched God. She immediately knew she was different. Her vision deficit disorder was on the way to being corrected.

Both Mark and Luke's versions of this story add a detail not included in Matthew's: Jesus was not only aware that she touched Him, but He also felt an energy flow from Him to her.

What can we learn from these stories about correcting our own vision deficit disorders and helping others with theirs?

Sometimes, our own vision deficit disorders are hard to recognize. We get so used to seeing things or people in a certain way that we need to be challenged by someone else to consider another perspective. That's what Jesus did continually with the people He met. Rather than seeing a person as a sinner, or a tax collector, or an outcast, Jesus saw every human being as a child of God, created in God's image. He calls us to do the same.

One of the biggest vision deficit disorders today is our habit of seeing people only through narrow categories. He's a Jew. She's a Gentile. He's rich. She's poor. He's a nerd. She's a geek. He's a liberal. She's a conservative. The overuse of labels prevents us from correcting our vision deficit disorder.

Another cause of vision deficit disorder is rigidity. I read about a California zoo that moved to larger facilities, providing the animals with more room to roam. One rhinoceros, however, never adjusted to his spacious new environment. He continued to walk in a small circle that matched the dimensions of his old home. Sometimes, we resist breaking out of what we have always known — how we've always thought or seen things. This is a sign of vision deficit disorder.

What fosters this disorder? One factor is the belief that there is only one right answer in any given situation. We believe that what we see is all there is, or that our solution is the only workable one. Add to this perfectionism, prejudice, judgmentalism, and fear of change. All these things contribute to a vision deficit disorder that imprisons our imagination within unnecessary limits.

The rhinoceros could have discovered new delights in his surroundings if he had ventured beyond his self-imposed boundaries. That's exactly what the woman with the hemorrhage did. She moved beyond the boundaries she and others had imposed on her. She took the first step by reaching out to touch the cloak of Jesus. Deep within herself, she had a tiny glimmer of faith and hope, which told her that if she could touch Jesus — even the hem of His cloak — she would be helped. That action began to correct her vision deficit disorder.

The love of God, as expressed in Jesus, then helped her take the next step. Jesus didn't criticize her but affirmed her timid action. His loving touch came through His smile and encouraging words, continuing her healing process.

Here's a story I've shared before — it's one of my favorites. When Karen was pregnant with her second child, her 3-year-old son Michael began a relationship with his unborn sister by singing to her every night. Night after night, he sang the same song.

But when the baby was born, there were complications during the delivery. Michael's sister was in serious condition by the time she arrived. She was rushed to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at St. Mary's Hospital in Knoxville, Tennessee. As the days passed, the infant grew weaker. The doctors told the family that her chances of survival were almost non-existent and tried to prepare them for her death.

During the stay in the intensive care unit, Michael kept asking to see his baby sister. He wanted to sing to her. Finally, the family dressed Michael in an oversized scrub suit and took him into the unit. He began to sing: “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray. You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away.”

What happened next was called “the miracle of a brother’s song.” The doctors called it a miracle. Karen called it a miracle of God’s love. The next day, instead of planning a funeral, they took Michael’s sister home. She had responded to the loving touch of her brother’s voice.

What Jesus did by responding with His voice to the woman who reached out to touch Him, and what Michael did by singing to his sister, is what we are all called to do. God wants to work through people like you and me in the same way that God worked through Jesus. God’s healing power is often transmitted through our healing touches — including the touch of our voices. It’s an important way of helping ourselves and others to correct our vision deficit disorders. Amen.