Book 37

Sunday June 6, 1999

VISION DEFICIT DISORDER

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

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

People who attend church worship services tell me that in listening to sermons, they sometimes have "attention deficit disorder." It could be their problem or the preacher's problem or a little of

both. I know that in delivering a sermon or in listening to a sermon, 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: commitment deficit disorder

I know people who have "priority deficit disorder." They have trouble in establishing priorities in their lives. They have no sense of purpose. They don't know what things to put first in their lives or put the wrong things first, sometimes without being aware of it.

I also know people who have "character deficit disorder." They lack "character." Some of the

things that make up character in a person's life are courage, discipline, and integrity. A person who does not have "character deficit disorder" is someone you can trust.

Another type of disorder that is present in some people is "gratitude deficit disorder." There's not an ounce of thankfulness in their lives. They are never grateful for anything they have because they always want more. Once in a while they might be grudgingly grateful, but it hurts them to do so.

Related to this disorder is "joy deficit disorder." Such 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 in this sermon by "vision deficit disorder?" People who have this disorder have "tunnel vision." They can never see the broader picture. They cannot see the forest because of 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 ever color outside the lines. They refuse to re-examine their rigid basic assumptions. They cannot easily

accept 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 who have 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 some people who have vision deficit disorder in terms of how they see themselves. They see themselves as being of no account, or having no gifts or talents, or of not being able to grow and learn. They believe they are unacceptable even to God.

In the story in the Gospel of Matthew read earlier,

there are people with all these types of "vision deficit disorder." Here's what happened. Jesus was inviting 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 to happen. Once a sinner, always a sinner. People do not change.

Then Jesus went to a dinner party in Matthew's house and many tax collectors and sinners came and they were all eating together. When the critics of Jesus heard about it, they complained to the other 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 and limited view of God's love and grace. Jonah in the Old Testament story had this kind of vision deficit disorder. Why would God be interested in the people of Ninevah?

Jesus tried to correct their vision deficit disorder. When he heard what had happened he said, "Those who are well have no need of 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, you need a larger vision of God.

Later in the story there is 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 to that house, a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned and seeing her said, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well.

What this story doesn't tell us because every person in that time would already know it, is that a woman with her condition was considered unclean, an outcast, untouchable. I believe she has come to think of herself in the same way. Until the day that she saw Jesus, she had given up all hope. She had considered herself as

incurable and as having to endure a lifetime of suffering and pain. Or worse still, she could've come to the conclusion that God was punishing her for some sin of which she was unaware. Many people get that idea even today when they face difficult problems. It's a type of vision deficit disorder.

I also believe that this woman was becoming more and more depressed. Her sense of self-worth was almost depleted. She was convinced that no one was interested in helping her. If someone would only pay attention to her. If someone would only treat her as a human being instead of a person with a problem. I'm convinced that she had tried many times to make friends but her shyness kept her from reaching

out very much.

Here's what I also think happened. One day she heard the rumors that a new teacher and healer was going to be in the area where she lived. The least she could do would be to stand at the edge of the crowd where she wouldn't be noticed and maybe she could get a look at this person, or perhaps she could even get close enough to touch him. She was taking the first step toward having her vision deficit disorder corrected.

The crowd that day was larger than expected. She could sense that there was something different about this man. Putting her shyness aside, she decided she had to get closer. So she began to work her way slowly through the crowd.

The closer she got to Jesus, the more she was sure that here was someone who could help her in ways that no one else could. If only she could touch him, that would be enough. Timidly and with fear and faith, she got as close to him as she could, stretched out her hand through the crowd and touched his cloak. It was as if she had touched God. She knew immediately after touching him that she was a different woman. Her vision deficit disorder was on the way to being corrected.

This story is found in three of the four gospels--Matthew, Mark and Luke. Both Mark and Luke have a detail that is not included in Matthew's version. They report that Jesus was not only aware that she had touched him but he

also felt an energy flowing from him to her.

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

Sometimes our own vision deficit disorders are difficult to recognize. We get so used to seeing things or people in a certain way, that we have to be challenged by someone else to consider another alternative. That's what Jesus did continually with the people he met. Rather than seeing a person as a sinner, or a tax-collector, or a Samaritan, or an outcast, or a woman with a hemorrhage, or a leper, or a rich person, or a poor person, Jesus saw every human being he met as a child of God, as an individual created in

God's image and he calls us to do the same.

One of the biggest vision deficit disorders still present in today's world is our habit of seeing people only in narrow categories. He's a Jew. She's a gentile. He's German. She's English. He's African American. She's European American. He's rich. She's poor. He's a nerd. She's a geek. He's a liberal. She's a conservative. He's a jerk. She's a radical. The overuse of labels keeps us from having our vision deficit disorder corrected.

Another related cause of vision deficit disorder is rigidity. I read about a California zoo that moved to new and larger facilities that provided the animals with more room to roam. One rhinoceros

however never adjusted to his more spacious environment. Even in his new quarters this animal continued to walk around a small circle that measured the same dimensions of his old home. Sometimes we, like this rigid rhino, resist breaking out of what we have always known or how we have always thought or always seen things including how we see other people. It's a sign of vision deficit disorder.

What fosters this kind of vision deficit disorder? For starters there is the mind-set 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 that perfectionism, prejudice, judgmentalism and fear of change. All these thoughts, feelings and

activities contribute to vision deficit disorder that can imprison our imagination within unnecessary limits.

We know that unfortunate California rhinoceros could discover new delights in his surroundings if he would move beyond his self-imposed boundaries. That's exactly what the woman with the hemorrhage did. She moved outside the boundaries she had heretofore set for herself and which others had imposed on her. She took the first step when she reached 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 somehow touch Jesus, or even the hem of his cloak, she would be helped in some way. That action began the correction of her

vision deficit disorder.

The love of God as expressed in Jesus then helped her take the next step. Jesus did not criticize her but rather affirmed her timid action. His loving touch came through his smile and encouraging words. That continued the healing process.

Here's a story I've used before. It's one of my favorites. When Karen was pregnant with her second child, a seemingly normal pregnancy, her 3 year old son, Michael, began a relationship with his unborn sister by singing to her every night. Night after night he would sing the same song.

When it became time for Karen to give birth to

the baby, there was trouble during the delivery. Michael's sister was in serious condition by the time she was finally born. The infant was immediately rushed to the Neonatal Intensive Care unit at St. Mary's hospital in Knoxville, Tennessee. As the days passed, the infant grew weaker. The pediatric specialist told the family that chances for her survival were almost non-existent and he tried to prepare them for her expected death.

During the stay in the intensive care unit, Michael asked continually about seeing his baby sister. He wanted to sing to her. At the beginning of the second week, they dressed Michael in an oversized scrub suit and took him into the unit to see his sister. Michael was asked to leave. His

mom protested however and said, "He is not leaving until he sings to his little sister." He began to sing this song. "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 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 when they thought they might be 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, what

Michael did by singing his song to his sister is what all of us are called to do. God wants to work through people like you and me in the same way as God worked through Jesus. God's healing power is frequently transmitted through our healing touches which includes the touch of our voice. It's an important way of helping ourselves and others to correct our vision deficit disorders. Amen.