

Lent 4, 22 March 2020
John 9:1-41
Show us New Sight
First Mennonite
Church

I don't know if any of you have ever come across the Daily Bonnet. Andrew Unger, the brains behind it describes the Daily Bonnet as a Russian Mennonite satirical news site from the

heart of the Bible belt, Steinbach, Manitoba. In the last couple of weeks, he's created some great fictitious stories around Covid-19 with hilarious headlines like: *Mennonite man self-isolates after visit to Jantsied (the other side)*. Or, *Shunned Mennonites Feeling Super Safe Right Now!* He then has a funny story to go along with the headline.



In an extraordinary time like this, we need some humour to carry us through.

It's amazing to me how something you can't see, something so tiny, so microscopic—can wreak such havoc on daily life, grinding most of our routines and plans to a halt. Though we can't see Covid-19, all of us can see the incredible impact it is having on us.

We see empty streets. We see closed gyms, swimming pools, libraries, businesses and restaurants. We see schools and universities around the world cancel in-person classes for online ones. We can no longer watch any professional sports games as they've all suspended their seasons, forcing your favourite sports channel to scramble to fill the airwaves with re-runs of old games. A couple of weeks ago, CBC radio's sport segment consisted of an awards banquet. I've seen many people helping others by offering to buy groceries, picking up prescriptions for those who can't. There are medical students in Vancouver taking care of the children of doctors and nurses so they can continue to care for those who are sick. We see the impact of a virus that we can't see.

The story in John's gospel today is about seeing. A man, blind from birth, is healed by Jesus and regains his sight—a wonderful thing. But then things become complicated. If we had gathered together for worship today, my plan was to have a group of people take on the different characters as part of our scripture reading. I encouraged you to imagine yourself in the story as you read the scripture passage before you began this video.

There are numerous characters in this story. There are the disciples, the man born blind from birth, the Pharisees, the neighbours, the parents, and of course, Jesus. What did each of these characters see?

What did the disciples see? They saw the blind man, but what they saw was influenced by what they already believed. They assumed since God is good, God can't be credited with the evil and misfortune that happens to people. If someone suffers, is ill, meets some misfortune in their life, then its because of something bad they did. As a result, the disciples didn't see someone in need of healing, but only **who was to blame.**

How often do we reduce what we see to who is to blame? What did she do wrong to get cancer? What did they do wrong to lose their farm?

Another character in this story is Jesus. Jesus refuses to accept the disciples' simple assumption that the reason people suffer, the reason people are ill, is simply because of sin or wrongdoing. The ways of God are often just a bit beyond our understanding because God sees things, sees people differently than we do. Jesus puts the correction on it when he says in effect, that the question is not who is wrong and where does guilt lie, but rather, "What work of God will be shown in this unfortunate situation." Where is God in this terrible situation? It is an altogether different question to the plight of the man born blind.

What does Jesus see? He looks beyond the problem, "who sinned", to see a living, breathing, suffering person. Love, compassion, and empathy are the eyes with which Jesus uses to see. And this moves Jesus to seek restoration, and healing for the man. Jesus spits on the ground, kneads some mud cakes, anoints the man's eyes, and sends him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does what he is told and returns healed.

This should be the end of the story where everyone lives happily ever after. After all, Jesus did a good thing, didn't he? He healed a man born blind from birth.

Neighbours, friends, and relatives should have celebrated with a potluck. Instead, there was a huge conflict. Why?

Enter the blind man's neighbours who see the man born blind but can't figure out why he isn't blind anymore. It looks like him, they say. But it can't be him because the blind are...well...you know, blind. But when they hear about his healing being done on the Sabbath, they immediately see, what? **Not a wondrous healing, but a theological problem.** They turn the healed man over to the experts in theology, the Pharisees.

Apparently, Jesus kneaded the spittle and dirt together and healed the man on the Sabbath. And kneading was a forbidden activity on the Sabbath, according to the Mishnah, the oral tradition of the Pharisees. In other words, when you break the rule, the custom, the way we do things, then that's wrong. **The Pharisees looked at the healed man through legalistic eyes.** They turned what ought to have been a celebration of a man's healing, first into a legal argument about what can and can't be done on the Sabbath, and then finally into an outright denial that a healing even took place.

The blind man's parents are the tragic characters in this story. Though they see their son healed they can't celebrate this good news with their son, because of their fear—fear of being ostracized and shunned by their community of faith. They could only see fear. So, instead of embracing their son, they threw him under the bus, so to speak. *“Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.”*

I'm sure we all have stories about how fear is affecting people these days. My spouse came home from work the other day and told me a story about one of her colleagues who appeared very worried. She saw that and ask her colleague if everything was okay. This question opened up a conversation where her colleague came to see that her stress and worry stemmed from spending too much time watching story after story about Covid-19. There is a fine line friends between being informed about what is going on and being obsessed with what is going on.

We often say, seeing is believing. The thing is, every character in this story saw the same thing. And each character saw very different things.

- The disciples saw a moral problem.
- Jesus saw a person in need.
- The neighbours saw a theological problem

- The Pharisees saw a legal problem.
- The parents saw fear.

What shaped how they saw at that moment? Do our hopes, our theologies, our fears, our faith, our prejudices shape what we see? What would I have seen if I were there?

Or anywhere, really! How do you and me see the world? What shapes what you and I see? Surely the things we believe shape how we see. Surely our upbringing and our education shape what we see, and how we see, and what feelings we see with. I'm inclined to see things with my brain, to try to make sense of things, to ask questions about everything I see. One of the reasons we are in the church is to learn how to see things as Christians. When I was young that meant to try to assess things as right and wrong, but now seeing things as a Christian seems more to be about seeing healing, reconciliation, belonging, where is God in each and every situation?

How do you see the world?

How does the colour of my skin shape what I see?

How does living in one of the wealthiest countries in the world shape what I see?

How does my financial security shape what I see? (I could go on for a long time)

Or let's ask the question from the other side – how am I blind? What kind of blinders am I wearing? Surely if we are conditioned to see certain things, it is just as likely that we are conditioned NOT to see some things. Now, I realize that asking "what are you blind to?" is kind of like asking "describe in detail the kinds of things you don't see!" Asking what are our blind spots is complicated.

Think for a moment what we can be blind to. We can be blind to hope and to beauty, blind to the possibility of change in some dark part of our life, which might show itself as depression. We can be blind to the help others around are offering, feel alone or despairing. We can be blind to the hurt and pain of someone near to us, and seem indifferent, or see in them meanness when it is really pain. We can be blind to God, and feel afraid, or alone, or lost. What makes us blind to these things? What shapes our seeing, and what shapes our blindness, what frames our blinders?

In answer to the Pharisee's question, to my own question, I would say "Yes, surely we are blind!" Maybe it's easy to be blind to poverty. If we live in the right place, shop in the right parts of town, go to a nice church, we might be able to simply not see poverty. Or maybe we do briefly encounter it when we see a news report about it. Driving past a poor person is easier than having them walk beside you down the sidewalk telling you about the last time they ate. Maybe it's a coping mechanism to turn a blind eye. Tunnel vision.

Maybe it's easy to be blind to racism or sexism. Has our vision been very effectively shaped, with suitable blind spots, to make us blind?

Critically important is the question 'how do we restore our vision?' What would it mean to see again? With new eyes? To have our vision restored?

As followers of Jesus, as disciples of the good news of love, what can we do to see? To see hope, to recognize help, to spot pain, to notice injustice, to detect bias, to identify privilege, to see?! What does it take to see Christ in each person, in each problem, in each place?

I have a few spiritual practices about how we might be able to help ourselves see, to help each other see, to see the world with the eyes of faith. This is certainly not an exhaustive list.

- 1. Widen your community**—spend time with people who are different or think differently than you. Spend time with people who are not like you.
- 2. Don't rule out miracles** – Be receptive to, and imagine, seeing in a new way. A posture of openness to God can open up unexpected changes, miracles of new sight. Be open to seeing God in every person and every situation, both good and tragic.
- 3. Pray for people and situations**—in the Lenten Prayer Guide which I posted on FMC's website, one idea is to pray for a specific news story, the people that are part of the story. Spend time telling God what you see, and inviting the light of Christ to shine on those people and situation. See if it changes how you see.
- 4. Shine a light** –be thankful for the smallest gifts, express appreciation, tell your own story - all these help others to see hope and beauty and joy.

5. Change your view –force yourself to see a familiar thing in a new way, and see what happens. Read something new. Have a conversation with a stranger. Use a different metaphor for God when you pray.

During these times of physical distancing doesn't have to be a time of social or spiritual distancing." Jesus shows us new sight. My prayer for all of you during this time comes from a hymn: "Open my eyes, that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me. Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!"