

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

April 3, 2011

Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: That the Blind Might See

Psalm 23, John 9: 1-41

The Gospel of John tells us, "As (Jesus) walked along, he saw a man blind from birth." We may have family members or friends who are blind. It is likely that someone who is listening to this sermon on the radio is blind. Sometimes people go blind because of an injury or degenerative diseases. My father was partially blinded by macular degeneration. Sometimes, as with the man who Jesus saw in his walk near the temple in Jerusalem, a person is born blind for a variety of reasons.

Today, we do medical studies to find out why a person is born blind, and try to restore their sight to the best of our ability. God has helped us to make remarkable gains in this area. In 30 AD, such medical science was not available, so the man's blindness became a theological study, and conversation for the disciples with Jesus.

"His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" In 30 AD, the Jewish belief was that if you were ill, you had sinned, and God was punishing you. There are still people who think this way today. In the case of the man born blind, the Jewish leaders wondered if he or his parents had sinned, and caused the man's blindness. Either way, he was a sinner to the Pharisees who said he was unacceptable to God. So it was not surprising that the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" While we can bring illnesses upon ourselves or others by our sinful behavior, the truth is that God does not punish us for our sins with illnesses as people in the time of Jesus thought.

Jesus challenged the sin, illness and punishment belief of his time when he answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." The **first part** of this answer is a great relief. When my brother, David, was born with Down's Syndrome, my mother thought at first that she had sinned and God was punishing her son for her sin. It took a while, but many people were able to convince my mother otherwise. Today's gospel lesson from John 9 was a key to that change of mind. In this passage, we hear Jesus disband the common belief of that day that sin and sickness automatically go together.

**The second part** of Jesus' answer to the disciples was, "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." At one time, this answer bothered me. It made me wonder if God caused people to be born a certain way and how are we to know? But, Jesus does not directly address these questions in this passage. Instead, he leads us past these questions in his answer. "God will overcome this man's blindness." Biblical Professor, Gerard Sloyan writes, "God is greater than all suffering because God overcomes it in solidarity with our salvation. This is the meaning of the phrase 'manifesting the works' in the man blind from birth. It is neither a glib response about human pain nor an assurance that a miracle impends. It is a statement that God will overcome the man's impairment in a way and at a time known to God." What I have observed in myself, my family members and many of you with impairments is this very truth; that God's works are seen in us and done through us despite any limitations on

our minds or bodies. With my brother's condition, God caused my family to become more understanding and compassionate of people with special needs. My brother witnessed to the Christian faith in his unique way to many people. I have also learned that if we are cured of any illness, it is in God's time. If we are not healed, we can still do God's work, and be God's witnesses. [Interpretation-John](#), pg. 115.

We can also "see" the power of God to overcome the limitations of disabilities in the following story. "What terrible sins have I committed? Surely, I don't deserve this affliction!" cried Reva to her hospital roommate. Reva had just been told that her cancer had spread to her lungs and bones. After a mastectomy and chemotherapy, Reva, a young woman, had believed her breast cancer was under control, for which she was thankful to God.

Reva had thrown herself into church work as president of the women's mission group and chairperson of the Altar Guild. She witnessed to her faith by word and service. After she had begun to experience severe back pain and general weakness, Reva sought her doctor's opinion. The doctor ran tests and the results were devastating. The cancer had spread.

Her roommate attempted to console her by telling her that God was a God of love and that God loved her. She assured Reva that God was not punishing her for any sin she may have committed because everyone has 'fallen short' of God's expectations. 'You must continue to witness to your faith even through this bad time, and God will continue to use you.' Reva calmed down somewhat and said, 'I must look terrible because I've been weeping for hours and my husband is coming to see me soon.'

Her roommate replied, 'Honey, I don't know how you look! You see, I'm blind. "Emphasis," March/April, 2002, pg. 21.

This blind woman at that moment became one of the children of light who was God's witness despite her lack of physical sight. She was a testimony to God's love and power over disabilities. God also led the man born blind in the Gospel of John to become a fantastic witness to the fact that Jesus was God with us, that Jesus was the light of the world, and that what Jesus did with the blind man was a demonstration of God's power over physical and religious darkness.

Another powerful point in this story and for our lives is that Jesus took the initiative to approach and to heal this man. The man, initially, said not a word to Jesus. John writes, "Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see." Jesus took the initiative to heal this man of his blindness, and save him.

One would think that the healing touch of Jesus would bring a new and easier life for the man, but this was not so. His trials after the healing led him to make some oft quoted statements of great witness to who he and Jesus were. Curious and skeptical neighbors kept asking him what happened, and if he were the once blind beggar from the street whom Jesus healed. He replied, "**I am the man.**" The religious leaders quizzed him even more severely. In reply and as a testimony to whom Jesus was he told them the following: "**He is a prophet.**" "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that **though I was blind, now I see.**" "Here is an astonishing thing!

You do not know where he comes from, and yet **he opened my eyes**. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will." Most importantly the now healed man responded to Jesus' question, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" with "**Lord, I believe**. And he worshiped him."

On the other hand, the Pharisees despised Jesus, what he did, and refused to see him as the light of the world, as the incarnation of God, and the savior they had awaited for so many centuries. They became as children of the darkness.

Speaking of children of darkness, John Newton was once one. Because of his own spiritual blindness, he worked against the initiative of the one who is the light of the world. John lived from 1725-1807. John's life began in London, in the loving arms of his mother, who loved to teach him scripture and hymns. He was reading the catechism at age four. When he was six, his mother died. John lasted only two years in school. At age eleven, he sailed on his father's trade ship, but he soon fell out of his father's favor. John was pressed into military service. By age seventeen, he was in the British Royal Navy, assigned to a man of war, but he deserted. He served on a slave ship, and later became captain of a slave ship, transporting Africans to port where they could be sold for the best price. John had the reputation of leading a godless and abandoned life.

John nearly lost his life in a violent storm at sea in 1748. This event was a spiritual eye opener for him. It led him to make a positive response to Jesus' initiative to rescue him from darkness and restore him to the light of faith. John returned to the faith of his childhood, studied scripture and became a pastor in the Church of England at the age of forty and served there for twenty-five years. As he was writing his autobiography which included his spiritual experiences, he was inspired to put on paper the famous autobiographical hymn, that includes the phrase, "I once was blind but now I see," We sang this hymn as our hymn of praise, "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound."

On the gravestone of John Newton, in Oliney, England, the following words are written: "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the Faith he has so long labored to destroy." "Emphasis,"

Mar/April 97 pg. 18 and [The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion](#), pg. 200.

So what is our witness today concerning this Jesus who takes the initiative to open our eyes to who he is? What will be written about our lives when we leave this earth concerning our relationship to him? I hope and pray what is written will say that we all came to "see" that it was Jesus, who in the Spirit "stood before us to put the spit and mud in our eyes" to open them to who he is, and how he wants us to live. I hope and pray it says that by God's amazing grace we became believers in Christ, who is God with us, and the light of the world. I hope it says we worshipped him, and loved him and each other as his children of light and witnesses to the world, in spite of any afflictions our bodies carried.

Come, let us discuss all this with Jesus who has also taken the initiative to invite us to eat with him; to remember how he has given his body and blood in great suffering to cleanse us of our sins; and to trust in his promise of everlasting life where all suffering and pain will be no more.