

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church – Edina, Minnesota
Virtual Celebration of the Holy Eucharist for
The Fourth Sunday in Lent; March 22, 2020

“To See More Clearly”

Scripture: John 9:1-41

Note: Aired to the St. Stephen's Church Youtube channel with a Virtual Service of Holy Communion 3.22.2020.

Once upon a time it was perfectly acceptable to believe that the world was flat. To sail across the oceans but a little too far was to drop off the surface of the earth like a barrel going over Niagara Falls. Everyone knew that. And people who disputed that the world was flat were considered to be fools. Until they weren't.

And there once was a time when it was certain that the planet Earth centered the entire sphere of the universe. The earth did not move, even as the entire cosmos moved around it. The earth was fixed, immutable; it was the center of the universe. Until it wasn't.

And not too many days ago, we were going about the business of our lives, many of us relatively secure in our plans, as if we were somehow impervious to enormous powers of nature all around us. We were secure and in charge. Until we weren't.

You know, humankind has a long and sometimes problematic history with sight. There are many things we think we can see. Their clarity seems unquestionable. Our certainty... undeniable. Until we are forced to see something differently, to question what once seemed clear, or to doubt what was once considered perpetually true. Today's story from John's gospel makes me think of that. The story isn't ultimately about blindness; it's about a new and perhaps not entirely welcome vision of kindness and grace. It is not solely about healing of one man; rather it is also about transformation of an entire community. It is not entirely about the eyes... but also about the heart.

So, let me ask you: Who in this story is blind? Or maybe I should ask: Who isn't? Certainly the man who has been a beggar all his life because his eyes don't work... he is blind. But what of his neighbors, who have seen him every day sitting beside the street waiting for a handout, but who now, for some inexplicable reason, can't seem to recognize him anymore? I mean, did they ever really see him in the first place, or was he just an inconvenient part of the daily landscape? And what of his parents? They *know* he is their son, but they can't even see their way to supporting him, so afraid they are of the "righteousness" of the religious leaders. And what of those leaders, the Pharisees? How is their sight? Because despite all the best evidence and the incontrovertible testimony of the man who was blind but now can see, they

are quite certain something is amiss, somebody did something wrong. Healing on the Sabbath Day? Healing by some unknown and unimportant wanderer like Jesus? God would never approve something of which they would not approve. And so they are blind to who Jesus really is.

Do *you* see? In this story lies something of the choice we have as people with faith in Jesus. We can be certain and cynical like Jesus' disciples who are sure somebody must be wrong: "Who sinned, Rabbi, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Or we can be like Jesus, who sees a man's infirmities, doesn't hold them against him, and recognizes an occasion for grace. We can doubt the worth of the infirm and ignore their plight, like the blind man's neighbors did, or we can find ways to bring healing and acceptance where there was none before. We can open the eyes of our hearts to see what new things God is doing in our midst... in our church, in our towns, in our families, in troubled places around us. Even in *us*. We can see troubled times as occasions to care for ourselves and others with grace.

Why does Jesus have a beef with the Pharisees? Surely it isn't because they aren't disciplined. Because they aren't faithful. Because they aren't concerned or serious about their work or their religion. They are all those things. I think Jesus has an issue with them, because they don't understand their own blindness. They think

everyone else is blind. They see all they need to see. Yet in their certainty they become blind to another person's need for mercy, for grace, for healing and salvation and kindness. They are turning a blind eye to the loving, caring, forgiving, enlivening nature of God, the very thing Jesus is trying to help them see. Their sight is limited, and they cannot see that. "Surely *we* are not blind, are we?" they say to Jesus. And he says to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." In other words... Since you are so certain you are right, you might just get it wrong.

This story is an invitation to humility, I believe. A call to put love and mercy and forgiveness and awe and thanksgiving ahead of certainty, security, position, power, and righteousness. It's a call to be, shall we say, flexible in our faith, flexible even in our belief. Because we never really quite know what each day will show us, if we will but look and see. It turns out the earth is not flat, we are not the center of the universe, and we are not doing today what we thought we would be doing just a couple weeks ago. But it turns out also that each day brings with it occasions for grace, the chance to be healers and caregivers, the chance to forgive and be forgiven, to chance to gain new vision for life and faith. It isn't just the man born blind in this story being healed. Perhaps, if we will be see it, it is also us who are being healed, by the grace of God. And now, it's up to us to share that grace with others... you see?