

ōSee No Evilö

1 Samuel 16: 1 ö 13                      John 9: 1 ö 41

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In the short time I have been with you, many of you have heard me encourage you to do the hard work of clarifying this congregation's vision for ministry. Such a task is important in its own right, but it is particularly important for a congregation that is preparing to seek for a new called minister. Any vision for ministry has two components. The first involves being able to see clearly into the struggles and concerns of the congregation and the surrounding community. The second component involves the creative work of grounding the vision in some appropriate foundation.

For much of my ministry, I have been inspired by Jesus's definition of the purpose of his own work. I think his definition may help us with both components of our developing vision. In the Gospel of Luke, there is an account of Jesus's visit to the synagogue in his home town. This visit took place soon after he had begun his public ministry. He was invited to read from the scriptures and then comment on the words he had chosen. He unrolled the scroll until he found what he was looking for and then read a passage from the prophet Isaiah. He read the following:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*

*because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,*

*to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4: 18-19)*

Jesus then identified the purpose of his ministry with this prophetic statement when he told them that the scripture was being fulfilled in their hearing of it. For our purposes today, I particularly want us to consider that restoration of sight to the blind is one of his identifiable tasks. If we follow him, so, too, are we called to restore sight, but, perhaps our own sight must be restored first.

There are several passages in the Gospels where Jesus refers to the value of sight and where he opens the eyes of many people. For example, in Matthew, when the disciples ask him why he teaches in parables, he says the following, again quoting Isaiah:

*'You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive.*

*For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.'*

*But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.*

These foundational statements serve as the backdrop for today's reading from John. This long passage is best understood if we can see its value as being much more than a miracle story. It is too superficial to think of it only as a story designed to make Jesus look terrific. In both the Isaiah passage and in this story from John, we must consider at least one more layer of meaning. Not only is it the objective of the Christian mission to help other people to see, but we must deal with our own propensity to blindness, as well.

In another place, Jesus addresses the human temptation to be judgmental. He admonishes all judges first to remove the log from their own eyes so that they can see clearly to remove the speck from the eyes of others.

Frankly, it is so much easier to see this and other healing stories as simply a demonstration of Jesus's special status. He then gets to be the one with the power, and with the responsibility that goes along with it, and as a consequence of his greatness, we need take little responsibility ourselves. Any careful reading of the Gospels, however, consistently brings us back to our own selves as people created in the divine image. It brings us back to our own need for healing, our own propensity to judge others, and our self-righteous refusal to see clearly.

As you might imagine, I have been hearing a lot of accounts of the experiences that many of you have had in this congregation over the last several years. Your experiences are important, and I know that many of you have found yourselves wounded by one another and by how some things have been decided by your ordained and lay leadership. It is so very tempting simply to identify wrongdoers and to claim that they, whoever they are, should be held responsible for the church's troubles. Unfortunately, that approach seldom, if ever, works without creating yet another layer of wounding. It creates the heat of conflict and contention, but it sheds precious little light on anything. This temptation to judge is not unlike the first issue that our scripture reading highlights: Whose sin caused this blindness? This approach puts the attention on moralistic issues rather than on the blindness itself. It may be true to say that we are capable of doing the worst things when we are spiritually blind. I believe that all of us come to our lives in this congregation with the best of motives. I do not believe that anyone is actively trying to undermine the life and mission of this congregation. Still, conflicts come about and people end up wounded. How can that be? Perhaps real healing requires us to address our own blindness and to take the log from our individual and collective eyes so we can see clearly enough to minister with compassion and wisdom.

One of the most predominant logs that we can find in our own eyes is our belief that we actually have enough information to form a judgment about someone else. While it is sometimes appropriate to make observations of one another, those observations are only valid insofar as they affect us personally. Communicating about those effects can provide useful information, but judging the intent of the other can only create more wounding and blind reactivity.

Another factor in Jesus healing ministry is that healing is mysterious. The symptom of the disease may clearly show on the surface, but the real wound lies in the depths. As a result, healing cannot come until we can see clearly enough to look into the depths and that requires us to listen to one another. Judgment is a form of blindness. At the very least, it serves to put blinders on us that only allow us to see what we already expect to see.

Let me give you an example. One of the painful episodes in the life of this congregation was the process of becoming an Open and Affirming congregation. I was not here, so I do not have first hand information on what actually happened. I have been listening very clearly, however, to the echoes of wounding that still flow through this congregation. This is what I have heard: Once people identified themselves with one side of the issue or the other, then many poorly founded judgments began flying around. One side was judged as being reactionary and homophobic.

The other side was judged as being unnecessarily disruptive, naïve, or callous. And both sides saw the other as blind to the realities. For the most part, I think the wounds remain because people don't feel they were heard at a deep enough level. A necessary condition for healing is understanding. And let me make this clear, understanding has little to do with coming to agreement.

To further the example, it is one thing for me as a straight man to have opinions about the morality of same-gender relationships. But I have come to the realization that my opinions have little value if they do not include some awareness of the experience of the people I would presume to judge. And I can only get that by listening to others who have that experience.

Furthermore, it is one thing for me to have opinions about those people who have come to opposing opinions. But I cannot understand the basis of those opinions if I am not willing to set aside my pre-judgments and then listen with an open mind to the experiences of my adversary. Perhaps when Jesus admonished people to "Love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them", he was encouraging us to create a space in our conclusions for their troublesome, but ultimately useful perspectives.

Sometimes, blindness involves an inability to see, but at other times it is really an unwillingness to see. To be fair, we have a good reason for our unwillingness. It is difficult to change our views. It is difficult to be humble enough to admit that someone else might have a perspective or experiences that we lack. And it is sometimes painful to know that whenever we come to see more clearly, we will inevitably, and unpredictably, be changed by the experience.

As long as we confine our vision to the more superficial layers, the evil we see will merely be judgments that only serve to hurt others. But, when we take the risk of looking more deeply into ourselves and into our systems, then we will be able to see the hunger, blindness, imprisonment, and oppression that are the expression of evil in our time. Our vision for ministry can then respond at a practical level to real evil and it can be grounded in the wisdom of those visionaries, like Jesus, who teach us to see God.