

## You Must Be Blind John 9:35-41

Since I was a little boy, there is one question that has occurred to me over and over, a question that seems nearly impossible to answer. If you had to be one or the other, would you rather be blind or deaf? What do you say? Talk to the person next to you about it...

If you were deaf, then you would live in a world of silence. You would see the people talking, but hear nothing – occasionally that might be a good thing. You would see cars going by, but not hear the roar of the engine or the rattle of the frame. You would see children laughing, but hear only silence. When we studied this text in Bible study, one of the folks in the group shared the story of a person who had been deaf from birth and was given the option to hear again through miraculous surgery in her 60's. Do you think she did it? She did not. She said she had lived her whole life in an utterly quiet world, and to suddenly hear would be too overwhelming.

But if you were blind, then you would live in a world with no light. You would hear people talking, but never see the glimmer in their eyes or the smile on their face. You would hear the cars going by, but you would not know what they looked like, how a stream of taillights can create a ribbon of light on a dark night. This winter we have had some unbelievably clear nights, bright with a million stars. You would hear the crickets chirp at night, but you would not see the stars. You would hear the sound of children playing and running, but never see their faces, the delight in their eyes. Several years ago I had a seminary student in my class who was completely blind, from birth. She had such unbelievable determination, working through graduate school like every other student, preparing for ministry like every other student. She was always accompanied by her faithful Labrador Retriever, and she did everything every other student did and did it well.

A person who is physically blind or deaf, with support and education, can lead a fulfilling and rich life, and experience life in a way that those of us who can see and hear cannot do. In fact, despite the trepidation I have felt about this question since childhood, there is a worse kind of blindness than physical blindness. There is blindness to God's grace.

The story this from John's gospel is about a man who was blind from birth. Jesus and his disciples saw the man as they were walking along, and the disciples used it as an occasion to ask a theological question. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" They believed that congenital disability was a result of sin. Now we know that's not the case, and today we are free of the stigma we find in this text. But they did not understand it then, so the disciples asked the question. And Jesus responded, "No one sinned; instead this is an opportunity for God's grace to be revealed in him." Then Jesus spat on the ground and made mud and spread the mud on the man's eyes. Now the man never asked to be healed; as far as

we know, he was sitting there minding his own business. But Jesus then told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. So he went and washed and he came back able to see.

Can you imagine what that must have been like? He saw the sky, the sun, the water for the first time. He saw the earth and the people around him for the first time. He saw himself for the first time, as he gazed into the water for the first time he saw his own face. Can you imagine what a breathtaking moment that must have been? He was a changed man, so much that the people who knew him did not recognize him. He only vaguely looked like the beggar they had known. He had been gripped by life-changing grace – he who was blind now could see. Yet there are others in this story who are even more blind.

The people who knew the man were *concerned* that he had been healed, because they did not understand how it had happened, so they brought him to the Pharisees. The Pharisees asked him how he received his sight and he told them what happened. They were *divided*. Some said this man Jesus is not from God because he heals on the Sabbath. Some said how can a *sinner* perform such signs? In fact they were so divided they did not believe that the man really had been blind. Maybe he had been faking it! So they called in his parents and asked them, “Is this your son who you say was born blind? How does he see?” The parents didn’t want get in the middle of it, so they said, “He was born blind, and we don’t know how he can see. Ask him!” They brought the man back in and again they questioned him, and he took his last stand: “I do not know whether (Jesus) is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” Then they began to debate – the healed man even taunted them, “Why do you want to hear all this? Do *you* want to become his disciples?” Soon after that, the Pharisees said to the man, “You were born entirely in sin, and now you’re trying to teach us!?” And they threw him out.

Now I ask you, who in this story was truly blind? When we ask ourselves, would I rather be blind or deaf, the very idea of being either is frightening and troubling. But in the pages of Scripture, this is what God reveals to us: physical blindness is not nearly the worst kind of blindness. The worst kind of blindness is *spiritual* blindness. There are some symptoms for this condition, and the people in the story show us what they are. The man’s friends do not welcome him, instead they grill him; they do not celebrate him, they put him on trial. The Pharisees do not give thanks for the grace that has been revealed in this man’s life; instead they are interested in their own fights. They are more concerned with their own theological debates, than with the clear work of God in front of their face. And when the healed man finally brings them face to face with their blindness, they retreat into pride and kick him out. He argues with them, point for point, that Jesus must be from God. And when he has won the argument, they say how dare you teach us, and *drive* him out.

It is their *pride* that finally demonstrates their *true* blindness. They held so tightly to their own beliefs, they could not admit they did not see the whole picture; they were so sure of their own reasoning, they could not admit they might be wrong. They were so defensive of

their own power, they not could be in a position of weakness; they were so insecure in themselves, they could not recognize the grace of God in someone else.

And this is not just their problem. Pride blinds us as well. God is still at work in us, in the world, in the lives of men and women, in the church – but we often do not see it. A person who has carried a guilt for 35 years, practically crippled by the weight of it, finally accepts that God forgives him in Jesus Christ – and is released. A person who has been ashamed of themselves for a lifetime, feeling that something was wrong with them, finally understands God created them in love and loves them still, and they know a peace that passes understanding. A person who has lived their whole life asking, “How can I help myself,” suddenly begins to live by the question, “How can I serve others?” There are works of grace! But we often do not see it, because consumed with our own concerns, our own prejudices, defending our beliefs, preserving the way it’s always been, staying in our own comfort zones.

Today we begin the season of Lent, the forty days that precede Easter each year. Lent is a season of penitence, which means it is a season of confession. The most basic confession we can make is, “I am blind. I thought I could see, but now I know I can’t. Lord I am blind, but with your help I can begin to see.” The great hymn writer Fanny Crosby was physically blind and yet wrote the words to *Blessed Assurance*. “*Perfect submission, perfect delight, visions of rapture now burst on my sight; Angels descending bring from above echoes of mercy whispers of love.*” She saw the grace of God with depth and clarity. By God’s grace, with honest confession, those of us who are blind may yet see it too.

Patrick W. T. Johnson

March 9, 2014