

St Mark Sermon:
March 19, 2023
“Curiosity to Commitment”
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Lectionary Readings

First Reading - I Sam 16:1-13

“But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things human beings look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (I Sam 16:7)

Psalm 23

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me: your rod and your staff, they comfort me. ” (Ps 23:4).

New Testament - Eph 5:8-14

“This is why it said “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (I Pet 3: 15).

Gospel - John 9:1-41

“Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.” (John 9:41)

Grace to you and peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon in a Soundbite

This exit miracle- Jesus curing a person blind from birth- reveals his divinity. Beneath the obvious, this story with its second miracle declares that human beings are made for community, not isolation or self-autonomy. Jesus, the Light of the World can break through spiritual blindness. He sheds light to show what life can be like when the blinders of curiosity and critique are replaced with an open commitment to commune with him as loving Lord. This passage is the bridge between “I am the light of the World” and “I am the Good Shepherd.”

The Gospel calls us to give up disconnected curiosity and overzealous critique to enjoy a full faith commitment to live with others under the care of Jesus Christ; our creator and loving Lord.

“Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

“Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. (Jn 9:35–38.)

Pray

I. Introduction: Prakash "Light"

Manoj Kumar Yadav entered this world as an infant with cataracts. If he had been born in Lake County, IL, a simple surgery could cure this disabling eye affliction within the first few months of life. But Yadav was born in a remote village in India with limited access to health care. His parents, poor and uneducated, didn't even realize their baby son was blind until he began to bump into things while crawling. Years later, doctors who examined Yadav told him he would never see.

When Yadav was around 17, a team of eye specialists from New Delhi visited his remote village. They screened blind children and kindled hope that Yadav might someday be able to see. After receiving an invitation, a year later, Yadav and his father took a 13-hour train journey to India's capital. At the Dr. Shroff Charity Eye Hospital, a surgeon excised his cataract-ridden lenses and slipped in synthetic ones in their place.

When the doctors removed the bandages, Yadav's world was instantly filled with light. Yet shapes were incomprehensible. He couldn't tell people from objects, or where one thing ended and another began. His brain, deprived of information from his eyes for 18 years, didn't know what to make of this new flood of visual stimuli. Remarkably, his brain did learn to interpret the signals it was receiving from his eyes. The blurry and confusing world came into focus.

Yadav is among hundreds who are now able to see thanks to a project called Prakash, which means "light" in Sanskrit. India may have the largest number of blind children in the world. The vast majority live in rural areas, their quality of life worsened by poverty, lack of access to health care, and a dearth of facilities for the disabled. The irony is that there is stunning medical technology that allows the removal of cataracts and the insertion of artificial lenses. This is a miracle to celebrate. No one would ask if Yadav or his parent's sin caused his blindness from birth.

Let's roll back the calendar 2000 years to an era where such technology was not imaginable. This is our opportunity to stand amazed at the spiritual cataract surgery Jesus performs to turn spiritual blindness into faith commitment.

II. The Exit Miracle

John wrote his Gospel so that all might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in his name (Jn 20:31). This Gospel points to a meaningful and full life even in a world of suffering. The story narrative picks up the action as Jesus leaves the temple area after celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. During the festival, Jesus had confrontive encounters with Jewish leaders over his claim that he is the light of the world. His identity as divinity did not go down well and the tension is thick as Jesus makes his exit.

The book of Samuel, with its description of the anointing of David, reminds us that it is far too easy to focus on outward appearances and not see what God sees in the heart. Jesus and his

Heavenly Father are one but when Jesus was active in his ministry, religious thinking people were blind to this Divine Reality. Spiritual blindness was rampant, even within the celebration of a traditional religious ceremony.

Exiting the temple proper, Jesus passes by a beggar, blind from birth. The disciples notice Jesus' line of sight turn to this helpless, shame-filled being. The disciples allow their curiosity to escape and launch into a theological discussion on the source of his sin. Where did his suffering begin? Who is to blame? How are sin and suffering intertwined? Such timeless questions tap into the root of evil, disability, suffering and misfortune. Hear what Jesus says...it is not productive to speculate about the source of sin in every situation. Notice that no attention is given to the beggar himself; only to his plight. The focus of the conversation is to satisfy the disciple's curiosity; their hunger for intellectual/spiritual illumination, but not to care for this blind sufferer.

1) Turn curiosity into commitment by putting faith into action.

Jesus does not rebuke the disciples. Instead, he turns the occasion into a teachable moment. First, he reminds them of the main emphasis of his recent teaching: "I am the light of the World." Then, without fanfare, he makes a little mud with spit and places the disgusting mixture on the hollow eye sockets of the useless beggar. Third, Jesus directs the beggar to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. There is irony here because even though the pool was not far, the patient is totally blind. Making his way to that still pool is no simple task. He can't call an Uber but must make his own way. Curious as to the meaning of this Rabbi's intent, he interrupts his daily ritual and commits to putting faith into action by following Jesus' instruction. The result: a remarkable and total healing. This one who only this morning fumbled his way into the temple area to beg for a few coins, leaves in the afternoon with 20/20 vision without corrective lenses. Neighbors notice this transformation and the talk begins to buzz. The religious leaders get wind of this high-profile healing and open a critical investigation.

This is no ordinary miracle. This beggar is a fixture in his community. Blind from birth means that his non-working eyes were obvious. There was a dull whiteness where the life of his soul should be evident. The transformation from blindness to sightedness surely happens; but it is too stunning to accept. Perhaps this is not even the same person? How can there be working eyes where before there were once only empty sockets?

The investigation that John records is fascinating. Witnesses are called, testimony is given, accusations fly, manipulation and shame are applied, theological argumentation is undertaken; speculation fills the chapter. The back and forth dramas are worth digging through; but for the sake of faith refreshment, let's focus on one key factor that John is aching for his readers to grasp. The religious leaders may not be physically blind, but their hearts are so corrupt that they cannot take in the wonder that is so obvious before them. *Jesus is the Light of the World* with power over darkness and blindness. Unlike the beggar, these Jews had status and faith privilege from birth; these pious Pharisees were chosen, destined, and empowered with Divine revelation. This rare birthright was blinding them from seeing the One who was their basis for hope. Could they not step beyond their religious curiosity and surrender their spiritual blindness?

2) Turn curiosity into commitment by following the Light of the World who has a heart of compassion.

The Pharisees make it their mission to preserve assumptions, ignore evidence, and issue callous rebukes and rejections. There are times when hardness of heart causes even people with religious insight to hold onto spiritual blindness. On the other hand, this beggar lived his entire life in the shadows of society and in utter darkness. Light never had any impact on his being. Instead of seeing the wonder and letting this event turn their hearts toward worship, the Pharisees cannot get past surface appearances. At the conclusion of the investigation, the sighted beggar is thrown out to return to the sin and suffering that started the conversation in the first place. “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us! God shows his preferences. He plainly gave us sight and you, blindness. Appearances make it obvious who is right.” The Pharisees conclude: “your testimony is false. Out! You are rejected, an outcast from birth and an outcast to the end.”

3) Turn curiosity into commitment by opening the eyes of your heart to accept Jesus as the Lord of All.

Jesus hears of the interrogation and seeks out the healed man. This loving shepherd shows the kindness of his Lordship by reaching to the beggar rejected once again. In this meeting Jesus introduces himself in all of his fullness as the one sent by God. The man with new eyes opens the senses of his heart to spiritually see. A second miracle of sight happens. The compassion of Jesus turns curiosity and faithful steps into full commitment. It takes a teaching encounter to break through spiritual blindness and open a soul towards God.

If we don't pay attention, we can make the mistake highlighted in Samuel and played out by the Jewish religious leaders. We can focus only on appearances and remain in stubborn refusal to see what the Lord is doing and providing. We can rejoice that a person without eyes is made to see but our curiosity cannot stop there. We must learn from this second miracle where Jesus invites newly sighted to see openly with the eyes of his heart. This connects him with Jesus, the disciples and all Christians who follow. The blind outcast can now see and sit with others who are heaven bound.

III. The Hellen Keller Garden

Growing up, my memory always recalls my father working a second job to supplement his income as a high school teacher. For years, my father was the activities director at the Burr Wood Home for the Blind. This was a beautiful, classic mansion estate that was converted into a guest home for the blind and deaf. What I liked about that particular second role was that Dad would bring us to activities from time to time where we would interact with the residents. This was strange because none could see or hear. They would touch us and put hands on our faces & over our lips. My father would ‘speak’ in a strange language known as the manual alphabet.

My favorite place at Burr Wood was the Hellen Keller garden. My father told us stories about Hellen Keller because he met her when that garden was dedicated. It had numerous braille plaques and plants with much fragrance and texture. The game we played as kids was to cover our eyes and plug our ears so that we could wander the area using only our sense of touch. It was

great fun even with our denial of peaking. Of course, at the end of the playtime, we would open our eyes and remove the tissue stuffed into our ears. We would leave with our senses for sight and sound fully intact. It is not realistic to imagine life without the use of these senses.

Hellen Keller today is a controversial figure. She championed the rights of the disabled in her day by separating them from the mainstream. Such is not the thinking in our times as inclusion is central to disability advocacy. Still, Hellen Keller's personal story is worth knowing. There is a scene from Hellen's early life that is useful to recall in conjunction with our lesson for today.

Hellen was a bright and curious child before she lost her sight/sound senses due to a high fever. It caused her extreme frustration that she was not able to communicate with the world. Her behavior became violent and she was totally out of control when Anne Sullivan, a woman with weak eyesight herself (20) came to be her teacher. At 6, Hellen was unruly, unkept and a handful to manage. Anne, her teacher was getting nowhere with Hellen who could not grasp that hand motions contained a secret language based on touch. The magical moment came.

On April 5, 1887, less than a month after her arrival in Tuscumbia, Anne sought to resolve the confusion her pupil was having between the nouns such as "mug" and "milk," which Helen confused with the verb "drink." Teacher and pupil had a serious conflict with dolls being thrown and tempers flying. Helen was not realizing the power she could have for language through the means of touch. So, Anne took Helen to the water pump outside and put Helen's hand under the spout. As the cool water gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other hand the word "w-a-t-e-r" first slowly, then rapidly. Helen fought the exercise at first. Suddenly, the signals began to take on meaning in Helen's mind. She 'heard' in her mind that "water" was the substance flowing over her hand. Quickly, she stopped and touched the earth and demanded its letter name. By nightfall she had learned 30 words. Hear her memory of that moment:

"Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! ...Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life."

Through the language of touch, Helen regained not only hope of language but the meaning of reconnecting with people around her. That water pump was Hellen Keller's pool of Siloam. Life with others became a reality.

IV. Spiritual Sight

The second miracle in our Gospel is how Jesus removes the dullness of spiritual blindness. He can soften the anger and hardness of our heart to the point where we can see his loving care. He is our hope for abundant life now and a way into eternity. The turning point comes when we are willing to stop being satisfied with mere curiosity contained by constantly critiquing the wonder of his works around us. When we open the eyes of our heart to his invitation by recognizing him as Light of the Word, surrender to his Lordship and enjoy his kindness for the first time, we enter

the peace that comes from resting in his care. He becomes our Good Shepherd, who leads us through the Valley of the Shadow of darkness and death.

V. A Hymnwriter's Spiritual Sight.

What do these hymns have in common? All The Way My Savior Leads Me; Blessed Assurance; He Hideth My Soul; I Am Thine, O Lord; Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross; Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior; Praise Him, Praise Him!; Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim it!; and To God Be The Glory?

Fanny Crosby was born in a small village in Putnam County, New York, on March 24, 1820. Six weeks later she lost her eyesight. Her eyes became, inflamed and a local physician applied hot poultices, with the result that the baby's vision was destroyed. The indignation when this malpractice became known flamed so hot that the ill-educated doctor hurriedly left town for parts unknown. Fanny, herself, harbored no trace of resentment. She accepted her lot cheerfully, as a part of the will of God for her. Her natural buoyancy of disposition reinforced her Christian faith.

"Blindness," she wrote in later life, "cannot keep the sunlight of hope from the trustful soul. One of the easiest resolves that I formed in my young and joyous heart was to leave all care to yesterday, and to believe that the morning would bring forth its own peculiar joy."

Francis Jane Crosby wrote more than 9,000 hymns, some of which are among the most popular across Christian denominations. She wrote so many that she was forced to use pen names lest the hymnals be filled with her name above all others. And, for most people, the most remarkable thing about her was that she had done so in spite of her blindness.

A well-meaning preacher once remarked: "I think it is a great pity that the Master did not give you sight when he showered so many other gifts upon you."

Fanny Crosby responded at once, as she had heard such comments many times. "Do you know that if at birth I had been able to make one petition, it would have been that I was born blind?" said the poet, who had been able to see only for her first six weeks of life. "Because when I get to heaven, the first face that shall ever gladden my sight will be that of my Savior."

Those words come from one who went beyond faith curiosity and committed to Jesus as the true Shepherd; spiritual blindness is no more when such hope prevails.