

Seeing and Seen
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Lent 4A
John 9:1-41

I.

The renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright once told of an incident that perhaps seemed insignificant at the time, but had a profound influence on the rest of his life. The winter he was nine-years-old, he went walking across a snow-covered field with his reserved, no-nonsense uncle. As the two of them reached the far end of the field, his uncle stopped him and pointed out his own tracks in the snow, straight and true and unwavering. He then pointed out young Frank's tracks, which meandered all over the field. "Notice how your tracks wander aimlessly from the fence to the cattle to the woods and back again," his uncle said. "And see how my tracks aim directly to my goal. There is an important lesson in that."

Years later, Wright liked to tell how this experience contributed to his philosophy of life. "I determined right then," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "not to miss most things in life, as my uncle had."¹

Because of course we *miss* things if we are too busy getting from point A to point B, don't we? Sure, we may not get slowed down as often or interrupted. But as our scriptures for today point out, there is something holy and important about paying attention to our surroundings. After all. If we have been given eyes to see we should use them.

II.

¹ Buchanan, Mark. *Your God is Too Safe: Rediscovering the Wonder of a God You Can't Control*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books. 2001), 102.

The blind man was used to being overlooked. Though he was the one born blind, it often felt as though the rest of the world was inflicted with a vision impairment. As he sat, begging, trying to scrape together enough to live each day, most people walked past him, eyes averted. He couldn't see them, of course, but he could feel and hear their footsteps as they came closer and then retreated. "Maybe I am not just blind," he would think sometimes. "Maybe I am also invisible."

That is, until Jesus came by one day. The blind man hadn't sought out a miracle. He had become used to this life of daily begging and living on scraps. He had become used to being overlooked. So it was a bit uncomfortable when he heard a large group stop in front of him. "Teacher, who sinned...this man or his parents...that he would be born blind like this?"

The blind man had heard this spiel before. He knew all the usual answers. That his parents had messed up and somehow *he* was the one to carry the brunt of the punishment. Or that he had actually sinned in utero somehow, meaning that when he was born he was already cursed. He rolled his sightless eyes, sure that no one would notice. But then he heard the teacher answer, "No one sinned. Neither he nor his parents."

Well! That was new! And while he was trying to make sense of this original answer, he heard someone move closer. He heard someone spit. And he felt something sticky and strange being pressed on his eyes. Was that mud? It smelled like dirt. Like the dirt God was said to have used to make humans at the very beginning. What was happening?

The man who had spoken before then said to him, "Go wash in the pool of Siloam," and figuring that he was going to have to get that sticky stuff off his face, the

blind man asked for someone to help him find the pool. Once he and his helper arrived, he eased himself down into the water. And he sat there for a while, rubbing his face. When he opened his eyes, his world was filled with light! He looked around but no one was there. Where was the man who had put mud on his eyes? Where was the man who healed him? Slowly, he crawled out of the pool. And, grasping the walls of the buildings, he staggered into town.

III.

It didn't make much sense to the blind man. He didn't know who healed him. He never saw his face. So he wasn't ready for the interrogation that awaited him. Crowds quickly gathered as he stumbled back into their midst, his eyes clear and wide. People wondered aloud if he was the blind man who had sat for so long begging on the corner. They didn't recognize him standing up and looking them in the eye. Finally he had to tell them that he was the one.

"But how did this happen?" they wondered. He told them about the man and the mud and the water.

"Well, where is that man that healed you?" they asked.

"To be honest, I didn't get a good look at him, having been blind at the time," the man replied. "So you'll have to forgive me. I don't know."

The crowd decided that maybe the religious authorities might know what was going on, so they brought the man to the Pharisees. The man told his story again about the spit and the mud and the pool. The questions became more pointed. "Did you know that today was the Sabbath? Someone, somewhere has been breaking the rules. We

thought for a long time that it was you. Or maybe your parents. But now we are beginning to think that the rule-breaker is this healer. This Jesus.”

From every side, the man was bombarded with questions: “How were your eyes opened? Where is the man who did it? How could he do that? What did he do to you? Did your healer intentionally break the Sabbath? What do you say about him, now that he has opened your eyes?”

Not one person said, “Alleluia,” or “Praise God!” Not even the man’s parents who, frightened and not wanting to offend anyone, slipped quietly back into the shadows. No one asked the man what it was like to see for the first time in his life, or whether the light hurt his eyes. No one asked the man how he was feeling. No one asked the man what he would do now. Finally, the man said the only true thing he knew anymore. “Look. All I know is this. I was blind. And now I can see.”

IV.

The once blind man had become a witness to a savior he had never seen. Working out his own faith with fear and trembling, the seeing man had to figure out what his life would mean now that he was no longer blind. Who was he now that he was no longer simply part of the landscape, used by others as a landmark? “How do you get to the market? Oh you go up to the corner with the blind man and then turn right...”

The religious authorities never seemed all that bothered by his struggle. He was, to them, a sign of what happens when people don’t follow the rules. A convenient object lesson but little more.

But now he had been healed. And his neighbors were forced to recognize that maybe what they had become accustomed to was not, in fact, the way that things were meant to be. He was no longer blind. But he still posed a problem to those around him, confronted, as they now were, by their own blindness.

And so, outraged at the way that their rules are being challenged by this ungrateful man, the Pharisees tell the formerly blind man that he is no longer welcome in their sanctuary. Someone sinned. And they have stopped caring whether it is the man, his parents, or Jesus. They can't make sense of what has happened and he is making them too uncomfortable and too upset. He has to go. "You aren't welcome here anymore," they say.

V.

And through all the questions and the confusion and the anger, the seeing man stands silently, studying the faces around him. Trying to match voices with names in his head. He looks at his hands and sees them for the first time. The light filtering in through the atrium of the sanctuary is almost blinding. He never imagined that the world could be like this. So full of light and color and movement. It is like he has been born into a whole new world, a world so different than the one he had known. He doesn't understand why everyone is so angry and so upset. Can't they see how beautiful everything is?

Stumbling down the steps of a sanctuary he is no longer welcome in, the seeing man finally sits down. He's not sure where to go. Not back to that old corner. Not back to that old life. He doesn't know where his parents have gone. So he just sits. He looks at the sky and the trees. He watches the people walk by—the women and the small

children who keep getting distracted by bugs and flowers and have to run to catch back up to their mamas. He laughs a little to himself.

And then a stranger sits down next to him. “Hello,” he says. And the voice sounds so familiar. The seeing man turns and looks at the person talking to him. “Are you the one?”

“I am.”

Falling to his knees, the man who was born blind worships the one who has come back for him. Nothing had made sense for the man ever since he climbed out of that pool, wiping the mud off his eyes. His world had completely changed and the people he thought would be happy were angry instead. But this man, the one who gave him the gift, has come back. And now he knows. He knows what he will do with the rest of his life. He is ready to follow Jesus wherever he leads.

V.

As we read this story, we are left to wonder: who is truly blind? Is it the man whose eyes didn't work? Or is it the people who fail to see him when he sits begging by the side of the road? After all, even after Jesus gives the man back his sight, there are so many who still cannot recognize Jesus for who he is, happy to continue on, unseeing.

And perhaps we too are more blind than we like to admit. Dragged down by our anxiety or our fear. Unable to see the beauty of the world anymore because of the way we have been distracted—by the hustle and bustle of a life too busy to wander. By the rules and the regulations of a life that needs to follow a certain path.

But then Jesus meets us even in those places of darkness and our vision clears. It's like we were blind and then we can see. We can't explain it. All we know is that it

happened. Happened just as clear as day. We had been lost, dying inside. But Jesus came to us and rescued us. And the only testimony we can give is this: we have met a God who sees *us*, even when *we* are blind. A God who finds us, even when we are lost. A God who saves us and loves us and who will, in the end, come back to lead us home. Amen.

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