

“Acknowledging the Limits of Our Vision”

John 9:1-41

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Long before I ran into some issues with my left knee, I played church softball in Winston-Salem, but over time it became pretty frustrating. I played baseball earlier in life and still had good hand-eye coordination. I knew I was older, well into my 40's, but still I couldn't understand why I struggled to field the ball and even to hit, hit a softball, for goodness sakes, and slow pitch!

Years later, after we moved here, I figured out why I struggled. I couldn't see the ball because I was too stubborn to wear my glasses! I wasn't given a prescription until I was about 40. So, even though I had glasses and knew I needed help to see, I had difficulty coming to terms with my visual limitations. When I had to start wearing glasses to play tennis, that told me something; and when I was restricted to driving with my glasses, that told me more. I thought back and realized my problem.

But I am not alone. Most of us have difficulty acknowledging the limits of our vision in one way or another. Whether we are talking about physical sight, more subjective perceptions of the world around us or spiritual discernment, we may know at some level that we cannot and do not see everything we need to, but we still have trouble acknowledging the severity of our limits and thus, just how much help we need.

We have read two biblical stories today which point to such limits and offer guidance as we consider our condition herein. Both stories underscore just how blind we can be. Both stories contrast our sight with God's. Both stories call us to acknowledge the limits of our vision.

One story is found in the 16th chapter of 1 Samuel. It is the story of the calling of a new king. The old king, Saul, has disappointed God and God has rejected him, even regretted ever having made him king. The prophet Samuel is having a little difficulty moving on, he grieves over what has happened, but God is ready to move.

The call comes to Samuel to anoint a new king. He is to go to Jesse in Bethlehem, invite him to make a sacrifice, and then God will reveal the identity of the new king. Samuel goes and Jesse brings in his eldest and handsomest son, and Samuel assumes he is the Lord's anointed, but God says, "Do not look upon his appearance or the height of his stature; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Jesse brings in his other sons, but none is recognized as king. Finally, after the seventh son comes and goes, Samuel asks Jesse if he has another son. He does, though he is the youngest, the one keeping the sheep. He comes, he is a ruddy fellow, though the author says he has beautiful eyes and is handsome. God says, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Samuel does as he is told, the spirit comes upon David, and as Paul Harvey used to say, we know the rest of the story.

It is a rich and complex tale, full of meaning, but one of the functions of the story is to call attention to the difference between divine and human perception. Human beings tend to look upon the appearance of things. Even the prophet Samuel is looking for things he can see with his eyes, things which match his expectations for what a king ought to look like – age, height, strength, appearance. God looks upon the heart, God is concerned about other things, things like character and integrity.

David is the one God wants. He may not look like much now, but God thinks he has what it takes, and, of course, he does. He has his troubles, to be sure, David is not perfect. He sins with Bathsheba, has her husband killed in battle, refuses to acknowledge his sin, like others we know in public life, until he is forced to, confronted by the prophet Nathan, but David is a great king. The nation never does better than it does under the leadership of this king who appears to be such an unlikely choice at the beginning. Human perception is limited. Too often we judge on the basis of outward appearances.

I think of the scene in the movie *The Empire Strikes Back* where Luke Skywalker first meets the great Jedi Master Yoda. Luke hasn't a clue that he could be the one. Yoda is a tiny, shriveled-up character who looks like he might be frightened by his own reflection. He pesters Luke, says he will take him to Yoda, but does not immediately reveal his

identity. For the story, it's a nice bit of dramatic irony. For Yoda, it's a way to find out some things about his new student.

Yoda discovers that Luke is like most young warriors. He is impatient, enamored of war, and judges the book by the cover, sees in Yoda only exterior flaws and limits. Finally, Yoda reveals himself to Luke. Underneath the surface of this strange creature lies a Jedi Master. His strength comes not from a massive physical structure, but from within, from his connection to the force, a quasi-spiritual entity in the Star Wars Mythology. Yoda cannot be judged by outward appearance.

I also think of a conversation Dana had with a congregant in another setting about a prospective staff member. The congregant, apparently having some questions about the prospective new minister, due to superficial matters like height and appearance, asked Dana what she thought about him. Dana said she was impressed, but the person wasn't convinced. What did she really think of him? She liked him, she said. Still incredulous, the person wanted to know why. "Well," said Dana, "In addition to other reasons, my son and my dog like him."

Indignant at what she viewed to be frivolity, the congregant persisted, "No, really, why do you like him?!" "Really," said Dana, somehow keeping her composure, "Because my son and dog like him. I have found that dogs and children (unlike many adults) tend to be pretty good judges of character." Not surprisingly, this ended the conversation. But the message was communicated. The congregant acknowledged, if only to herself, that her objections were petty and superficial.

So are our perceptions much of the time, perceptions about people and events and what is most important in life. We judge on the basis of what we know and see. The trouble is we know and see too little. Our vision is limited, our perceptions are inadequate, our judgment is flawed. We, like Samuel, need the guidance of God to broaden our vision.

Another story which calls us to acknowledge the limits of our vision is found in the 9th chapter of John. This is a story about blindness and sight, but the man born blind is not the only one who has trouble seeing. As Jesus walks along, he sees a man blind from birth and his disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was

born blind?” The question reveals the ancient outlook on suffering, that it is the result of sin. The only question here is, “Whose sin?”

One could blame the blindness on the sin of the parents, for Exodus 20:5 says this. “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me.” We struggle to appropriate such thought, though we can name suffering which affects succeeding generations such as addiction and domestic violence.

One could also blame the blindness on the man. This seems really strange, since the man is born blind, but the rabbis have a theory that a child can sin in the womb. Lest we wonder where this theory comes from, we need only recall that Genesis 25 tells us the twins Jacob and Esau struggle in Rebekah’s womb. If we still think it is outlandish, we need only talk to a pregnant mother whose child in utero is kicking her!

Suffering results from sin, this is the thinking of the day, the only question is – whose? The man is born blind. Is it his fault or his parents? Well, what does Jesus say? “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” Some argue that Jesus answers the disciples’ question. I disagree. Jesus is not saying the man is born blind so that God can heal him. What kind of God would this be, blinding a child so that one day God can heal him and come out looking good?!

Furthermore, the phrase, “he was born blind” is not in the Greek in verse 3. It is added to many translations before the phrase, “in order that God’s works may be revealed,” because some people think it makes sense. It doesn’t. The man is not born blind to make God look good later. Jesus doesn’t answer the question of why. He does not offer a diagnosis. Rather, he offers a prognosis. He changes the question from, “Why has this happened?” to “What can we do?” and the answer is, “Give the man sight!” which, as we know, he does.

Human beings seem to obsess over the one question we often cannot answer, “Why?” We are quick to place blame when something goes wrong. God in Christ changes the question, shifts the playing field, works for healing and redemption. Jesus not only gives sight to the man born blind, he broadens the vision of disciples in all generations.

I think of Eddy and Cindy Ruble's response to the tsunami of 2004 that took the lives of over a quarter of a million people. They served as CBF field personnel in Indonesia at the time and were part of the initial response to this tragedy and the rebuilding effort. Many asked why this happened out of a sense of desperation. Some offered mean-spirited explanations, as they always do, but the Rubles said, "We don't know why this happened. All we know is that it is a tragedy. We need to ask, 'What can we do now?'" And in time, they said, "We see God not in the tsunami, but in the human response of compassion." That's acknowledging the limits of our vision and following the vision of Jesus.

But this tendency to obsess over the question why and look for someone to blame is not the only evidence of blindness in this story. In addition to the man's blindness and this obsession with blame, some of the people who have known this man struggle to realize it is him. Some say, "Yes, it is he," while others say, "No, but it's someone like him." All the while, the man says, "It's me, it's me, it's me! Hey, I am the man!" What is going on here. Either it is him or it is not. This is not a modern-day healing hoax. Why don't they recognize him?

Because it's difficult to see what we think cannot be. They know he has been blind from birth. He cannot be healed. So, if someone who looks just like him can see, it must not be him.

We do the same thing all the time. We know someone has had an addiction for a long time. So, we know they are not clean now. We know a relative has always been a real so-and-so. So, we know they haven't changed, no matter how many people they have fooled. We can be so convinced of a given reality, for good reasons, that even when that reality actually changes, we have an incredibly difficult time seeing it.

This is what's going on with the friends and neighbors who have known this man. It's a bit like the people who know Jesus growing up. Mary and Joe's kid, the carpenter boy – he's the Messiah? Sure!

But there is another group of people who have trouble acknowledging that the man who can see is the same man who has been blind since birth – the Pharisees. Their issue is different from the friends' and neighbors'. Their trouble is not previous belief in a given

reality. They haven't known the man before, and even if they had, healing is not impossible in their minds. Their issue is with the fact that Jesus has healed on the Sabbath. Even more so, their issue is with Jesus.

They see him as a sinner, not a Messiah. They see him as an adversary. Perhaps they are even threatened by him. But because they have such a negative view of Jesus, they cannot acknowledge the good he is doing. They may or may not believe the man has been given sight, but even if it has, it is not a good thing, because it has happened on the Sabbath, and because Jesus has done it!

How could anyone, especially a religious person, be this blind? Well, again, we do it all the time. Once we have judged someone, they cannot do anything to please us. Some people can do no wrong while others can do no right. Once we develop a negative judgment of character, whether our judgment is justified or not, that's it. That person is done. The trouble is our judgment is always limited.

In a recent issue of "The Christian Century" there is a fascinating interview with a police officer named Adam Plantinga who is the son of the former president of Calvin Theological Seminary. He weighs in on many difficult issues confronting law enforcement today, particularly in dealing with troubled communities. He is insightful in all of his responses. But what impresses me most is his level of self-awareness.

Before responding to a question about instances where police officers have been accused of wrongdoing, he says this. "I come to this discussion with all my own biases. My natural allegiance is to the men and women in uniform I serve with and that informs my outlook in ways that I am aware of and probably in some ways I am not..."

It is a helpful statement. Many of us acknowledge our biases and realize some ways they inform our thinking. How many of us are willing to acknowledge that our biases affect us in ways we are not aware of? That's what it means to acknowledge the limits of our vision. Samuel does this and listens for God's voice to broaden his perspective. Only the man born blind in John's story seems to see all that he is called and empowered to see. We all have our limits. Only when we acknowledge them can God help us to see more.