

## *Seeing What We Want to See*

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

I Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Often we see only what we want to see. That is not necessarily a bad thing. Around Valentine's Day I read in the local paper that couples happily together for many years still picture their partner the way they were years ago when they first fell in love. In other words, they don't do updates, but see them as they were. I believe that's true, which is rather a comfort. I look at my husband Randy, and while he's changed over nearly 20 years, I still see him as I did back then. I like to think that Randy sees me that way as well—despite present laugh lines and the effects of gravity.

So let me go back to that first premise—that often we humans see only what we want to see. We can, in fact, convince ourselves we see something that isn't even there. My family lives here in the Camp Hill borough, our children attending borough schools. We have no bus system. Our 3 kids walk to school, unless the weather is inclement or they've managed to sweet-talk Mom into driving them. No bus system means that, in the wintertime, our schools rarely close because there isn't the issue of slip-sliding school buses. It also means the kids and I hope against hope each icy, snowy day that Camp Hill does something, anything, so we can pad around the house in our jammies for awhile. I get up before 6 a.m., turn on the tv, and watch through blurry eyes, hoping to see "Camp Hill School District--Closed." I strain those blurry eyes while the local tv station scrolls through Cumberland County. I try not to blink once we get to "Big Spring School District." I try not to blink until I read "Cumberland Valley School District." Because somewhere in between it might just read "Camp Hill." Sometimes I'm sure I've caught a glimpse of our name, I desperately want to see our name, but, no, turns out it was Camp Hill Presbyterian Nursery School. Then I reluctantly wake the kids up, although the children are is certain that if they just stay in bed a little longer, they'll close the schools.

We see what we want to see. And that **can** be a bad thing. For when we have made an assumption about a situation, when we have already decided something to be true right from the start, we may begin to gather the evidence—any evidence—that will shore up that assumption, confirm that "truth" we believe. We will find ways to convince ourselves that we are seeing these things. Certainly that is putting the cart before the horse. Yet, we **will** see what we want to see, by golly! Such determination, such belief in what we think we see—such sin—has started wars, dissolved marriages, broken friendships, and led many a human being into making less-than-well-reasoned decisions in life.

The Pharisees in our Gospel lesson only see what they want to see. I like the way Frederick Niedner, a professor of theology at Valparaiso University puts it. Niedner writes about this healing of the man blind from birth, and succinctly describes the critical issues for the Pharisees:

“(The healing) has come on the wrong day, to an unworthy recipient, from a maverick agent whom the Pharisees can’t see for dust.” Let’s dissect Niedner’s statement.

First, he says it’s the wrong day. It’s the Sabbath, God’s appointed day of rest for his people. Not only is healing someone in and of itself considered “work” on the Sabbath, and thus a no-no, this particular healing required more work than usual. Not a simple laying on of hands and boom, it’s done, but a healing that requires Jesus to spit on the ground, knead the wet dirt into a pliable mud, and spread that mud across the man’s eyes. But wait, there’s more! Jesus tells the man to go down to the pool of Siloam and wash himself. There’s a whole lotta work going on here on the Sabbath. The Pharisees can only see that the event broke with official religious and institutional policy. Never mind the miracle of sight. Never mind the joy surrounding a healing. Jesus broke the rules. That’s what the Pharisees see.

Second, who received healing but someone unworthy! In that day, disabilities such as being blind or lame or mentally ill were considered the consequences of a person’s sin. The understanding of illness, contagion and infection, birth defects and other medical abnormalities was infantile at best. Sin! That’s what caused his blindness—and if he was blind from birth, then it must have been his parents’ sin. So the blind man, reduced to begging for a living, was considered sinful, and hence unworthy of being healed. What’s more, since he was blind from birth, technically he was **always** unworthy of being healed. There simply was no way for him to get out from under the cloud of unworthiness in order to be considered worthy enough to be healed. Case closed. Thus the prevailing belief that sin caused disease and disability meant this man was caught between a rock and hard place for the entire span of his life. That’s how the Pharisees viewed his situation.

The Pharisees only see him as they want to see him, and it galls them to see him healed, not just because he was considered unworthy. It galls them to hear him now speak about a healing they didn’t offer or couldn’t produce. A blind beggar who used to know his place in society is getting uppity, and now he’s issuing proclamation about someone outside the religious establishment. It’s proclamation that’s rocking the boat, for it’s proclamation that speaks about the healer being from God. Saith the Pharisees, if there’s going to be any proclamation around here, any worship around here, it better be directed toward the Temple, and Moses’ name better be invoked, and no one else’s. So, the religious authorities, attempting to retain their authority, interrogate him endlessly, asking him about the healing, asking his parents about the healing. It is as if, by gathering enough evidence, they can shore up their assumptions, and confirm what they want to see, what they want to believe—that he hadn’t been blind in the first place, that he was lying about certain events, that he wasn’t who he pretended to be, that maybe, just maybe, he actually was a disciple of this Jesus, in cahoots with this renegade Rabbi.

And that’s the third thing the Pharisees think they see. They see Jesus as a troublemaker, a rabble rouser, a maverick (as Niedner puts it) who will only serve to reduce the confidence the people have in the Pharisees and the Temple and the Law of Moses, and instead encourage them to place their confidence in Jesus himself, and that, my friends, would be blasphemy. Since the Pharisees already see Jesus as having broken Sabbath laws by healing on the day of rest, they see him as a sinner. And there is no way a sinner can be from God, no way for a sinner to perform such divine signs. And certainly no way for a sinner to heal another sinner. Nope. No way. The

Pharisees only see Jesus the way they want to see Jesus, and they cannot see the real miracle going on here that is above and beyond the gift of physical sight granted the man. For the Pharisees can't see Jesus as the healed man now sees him.

The more they press the healed man for details, for answers to their repeated questions, the more the man realizes **what** it is he now sees, and **who** it is he now sees. The man who had once been blind now realizes the one who healed him was the only one who **could**—and that Jesus wasn't sinful at all, but rather, sent from God. In his awe and wonder and realization about the true identity of Jesus, he now sees the true identity of the Pharisees. And he is astonished. He is astonished at what they cannot see. He is astounded that they don't understand. He is angry at their continued refusal to believe the truth. And now he knows they could never have healed him. He says to them, *"We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will."* It's pretty obvious to him—clear-sighted as he is—that many of the Pharisees do not worship God or obey his will. But Jesus does.

And so, by the time we reach vss. 37 and 38, the man who was given sight by Jesus confesses faith in this Jesus as his Lord. Not only has Jesus given him physical sight, Jesus has also made the man see what **Jesus** wants him to see: That Jesus was sent to bring God's redeeming light into our world, to do the work of God in our world, and so dwell in and among us that we might do the work of God as well, that we might worship and obey, that we might do what is good and right and true.

I don't know the derivation of the cliché, "Here's mud in your eye!" I know it's a drinking toast, and it's been associated with both the mud kicked up by race horses and the muddy trenches soldiers fought in. I like to think, however, it could be traced all the way back to our Gospel story—the story of spit and dirt, the miracle of healing, the joy of finally seeing. And thus this toast—"Here's mud in your eye!"—would be the warmest of wishes and prayers we could express for another person's clear sight.

And so I say a toast to you and to me. I say a toast that we will find mud in our eyes—through our worship life together and this Word of God we receive. I say a toast that Jesus' presence among us will work healing in each of us, cut through any blindness, and open us up to new life in him. Then you and I, clear-sighted, can go into the world and bring his healing to others. **AMEN.**