

Scriptures: 1 Sam. 16:1-13; John 9:1-41

The Lord Looks at the Heart

I love that Old Testament story we heard earlier today. It contains a great truth, which we so often ignore in our society, and which branches of the Church ignore even today. God told Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart,” (1 Sam. 16:7). How the world would change – for the better – if all those who claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior truly looked at the heart, instead of the outward appearance!

Today’s Gospel lesson also deals with issues of vision, and the heart. If you have your Bible or Bible app with you, turn with me to the Gospel according to John. We’ll be looking at the ninth chapter. I’m reading from the New International Version. **Read John 9:1-41.**

Denominational Differences?

Once upon a time, in a land far away, there were two blind men who had both been healed by Jesus. They met one day, and they were so excited to meet someone else who had been healed by Christ, that they decided to get together to talk over coffee and donuts. They talked about the wonder of sight, the beauty of flowers, how our glorious God paints the sunrises and sunsets, and how He so perfectly shapes children and grandchildren in the womb.

They talked about how life-changing it was to see the face of Jesus Christ. They were laughing, having a great time, enjoying each others’ company, when one of them said, “And do you remember when He took spit, made mud, and put it into your eyes?” The other guy was stunned. “Why no, He just said, ‘Receive your sight,’ and I could see.” The first man said, “Now wait just a minute, brother, you mean He didn’t use any mud on you?” “No,” came the reply.

“Well, did He at least have you go wash in the pool of Siloam?” “Ha! Of course not! Who would go there and do that?! Who ever heard of anything as ridiculous as mud in your eye, washed off in a pool?” “If He didn’t put mud in your eyes and have you wash in the pool of Siloam, then,” says the first man, “then you are still blind! Blind – you hear me? Because that’s the way Jesus healed me. That’s the way He does it!”

The second man became angry. He shouted, “Mud! Mud! Who ever heard of using mud?! That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard! Why, you still have mud in your eyes. You’re the one who’s still blind!” They got into a big argument – their relationship

was destroyed, and right then and there, they formed the first two denominations in the Church – the Mudites and the Antimudites!

District Superintendents

All joking aside, last week we had a visitor here at New Hope. I'm not sure if you realized that – it was a first for me, and honestly, I think probably a first for this church at least since Kendra and I started attending here regularly back in 2007. The District Superintendent of the Miami Valley District of the West Ohio Conference was here and worshiped with us last Sunday. To say I was shook is putting it mildly. District Superintendents assist the Bishop in the appointment process in the United Methodist Church. Usually you don't see these guys unless there's a problem.

There's no problem, as far as I know, friends. He was just stopping in to see how things were going, and to thank me for an email I sent to him back in December about the conclusion of our discernment process on the disaffiliation issue. In bringing up disaffiliation, I'm not telling you anything you aren't aware of. There has been tension in the United Methodist Church over the last year on the issue.

Shelby, Darke, and Auglaize Counties seem to be the “hotbed,” so to speak, of the disaffiliation movement in West Ohio. I'm proud of you for being people of integrity and honoring the commitment you made – and our predecessors made here many years ago when they first became affiliated with those legacy denominations which eventually merged to form the United Methodist Church. At Christmastime I emailed Dr. Wilson to let him know New Hope's decision, and told him we were moving forward and closing the door on the conversation on disaffiliation. To be honest with you, it was the best Christmas gift I received for 2022. I lost twelve weeks as your pastor, trying to navigate the political blowout related to the disaffiliation process. That's three months of lost time. At the same time, our shut-ins weren't visited. My family was neglected. And the mission of the church, “To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” took a backseat.

Called to a Common Mission – to Make Jesus Known

See, friends, while we may jokingly say there's no such thing as a part-time, or in our case, a half-time pastor, that's what you have. I have other commitments. And in the next year, in looking at Smart Goal development and conversations with our SPR Committee, I'll be re-prioritizing – God first, then family, then career. I need to set some better boundaries, and I'm going to be taking a day off each week, likely Saturdays, because I need Sabbath rest.

Friends, I was never called here to be a religious politician. You didn't call me to lead you to independence, like a George Washington or something. I was called here to serve, and to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God hasn't called you to be here to

do politics, either. He's called you to bring other people into relationship with Jesus Christ by the words you say, and things you do.

So I'm glad we've put the politicking of disaffiliation behind us, and that we've moved forward, out of that season. Dr. Wilson shared my email with Bishop Palmer. Dr. Wilson commented on what a nice facility we have, and I made the offer to share our space here with them for the District offices if they wish to relocate after the new district boundaries take effect. We are willing to form partnerships with anyone who shares our vision and mission – to make Jesus Christ and what He's done and continues to do on our behalf known to the world.

Vision and Spiritual Blindness

The issue of vision and spiritual blindness that we suffer from – that our brothers and sisters seem to be fixated on in the wider Church – is apparent in the Gospel lesson today. What we read in the Gospel is the experience of the first Mudite meeting Jesus face-to-face. What stands out to me – this is an entire chapter – is the discussion of blindness, which isn't necessarily the physical blindness which we so often pigeonhole this as. Yes, there was a blind beggar, who had been blind from birth. The interesting thing to me is the conversation about blindness – its causes, cures, and whose blindness remains. Jesus and His disciples see the man, blind from birth and His disciples want to know whose fault it is. Was it his fault, or his parents'? In other words, did the man sin, while he was in the womb, and that sin caused his blindness?

Pretty weird, huh? The disciples asking the question is the start of a multi-part story. Jesus tells the disciples that neither the man, nor his parents had caused his problem. Jesus specifically tells them, "This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life," (verse 3). In other words, "This is for you to see – now watch this."

Next we see the beautiful interaction, between the Light of the World – Jesus Christ – and the blind man. Jesus spits in the dirt and makes mud to put into the man's eyes. This act of Jesus – of spitting in the dirt and rubbing mud on the man's eyes causes Jesus to butt heads with the Pharisees in the story. He does it on the Sabbath (verse 14). On the Sabbath no one was allowed to do any work. It was a day of rest. Jesus mixing dirt and saliva and spreading it on the man's eyes is work. So now, the Pharisees are out to get Jesus. He's breaking one of the Ten Commandments, they think.

Can you imagine how the blind beggar felt, when he lifted his face from the water in the pool of Siloam, and opened his eyes, and saw the sunlight and colors all around him for the very first time? It must have been amazing! John records that the man "came home seeing. His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, 'Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?'" (verses 7-8). Of course, this creates a bit of a commotion in the community. "Some claimed he was. Others said,

‘No, he only looks like him.’ But he himself insisted, ‘I am the man,’” (verse 9). When the neighbors start asking questions, the man readily tells them what Jesus has done for him. So, they take him to the Pharisees.

Pharisees Preconceived Notions

The Pharisees question the man. They have some preconceived notions of who Jesus is and where He’s come from. They want him to tell them that Jesus is a sinner, or that He’s gotten His power from somewhere besides God. But the man tells them “He is a prophet,” (verse 17). That rubbed them the wrong way. The Pharisees bring in the man’s parents. “‘Is this your son?’ they asked. ‘Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?’ ‘We know he’s our son,’ the parents answered, ‘and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He’s of age; he’ll speak for himself,’” (verses 19-21). See, the guy’s parents are so scared of the religious politicians, that they won’t even stick up for their son. They’d rather “fit in” with the crowd, than to take a stand for Truth.

The Pharisees aren’t done yet. They call the guy back to the synagogue, and tell him to “Give glory to God,” in other words, “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” because they had Jesus pegged for a sinner since He’d “worked” on the Sabbath. Helping someone out was against their literal interpretation of the Old Testament Law. The guy tells them he doesn’t know if Jesus is sinner, but that he was blind and now can see! And then they want all the specifics. How did Jesus do it? The formerly blind man is getting fed up. “I’ve told you already, and you don’t listen. Why do you want to hear it again, do you want to be His disciples, too?” (verse 27). Friends, after the amazing miracle Jesus has performed on him, the man who was blind is ready to follow.

The Pharisees invoke the name of Moses – the chief cornerstone of their faith – and tell the guy they have no idea where Jesus comes from, with the implication that He’s not from Moses, like they were. When we have a life-changing experience with Jesus Christ, and are willing to yield ourselves to Him, the Holy Spirit tends to embolden us at times. Notice what the guy tells the Pharisees next. “That’s remarkable! You don’t know where He comes from, yet He opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does His will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing,” (verses 30-33).

Blinders of Religion Instead of Lenses of Faith

The Pharisees – in this story, and others – represent those stiff-necked, change-resistant people of Israel who, no matter what they witnessed or heard told, remained blind to the Good New of Jesus Christ. By this point in John’s gospel, Jesus has been traveling the region, and has performed approximately a dozen miracles. Changing

water into wine. Healing people with different diseases. Feeding 5,000 with a few fish and loaves. They had numerous opportunities to take a look at Him and figure out for themselves whether they thought He was God Incarnate, or just a political messiah. Every time they looked, they saw nothing – they wore blinders of religion, instead of lenses of faith.

They'd rather throw a person out, than admit that maybe their understanding doesn't fit the current situation. "You were steeped in sin at birth,' they said, 'how dare you lecture us!' And they threw him out," (verse 34). Friends, I'm convinced that in most current situations our understanding does not fit those situations, and instead of showing grace, demonstrating patience, and loving people as God loves them, we rush to get as far away as we can from that which makes us the most uncomfortable.

That is truly what I believe is happening in the wider Church. People are leaving not because any stance of the Church has changed, but because they are uncomfortable with the prospect that the Church might actually begin to love sinners as Christ loves them. See, Jesus goes and finds this thrown out, formerly blind, and now self-identifying "seeing" man, and all He asks is, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (verse 35). "Who is He, Sir? Tell me so I may believe in Him," (verse 36). "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," (verses 37-38).

Examining Our Blind Spots

We each have our little Pharisaical blind spots, friends. If we really look into our own hearts – if we let Jesus Christ, the Light of Life – shine on us and we really examine ourselves we can see that spiritual blindness affects all of us. That's okay. Go ahead and take a look at your own life. God already knows – it's no surprise to Him. It's just a matter of us letting ourselves be open to seeing where our blind spots are at, and then asking Him to lovingly continue to transform and transfigure us into the people He calls us to be as His faithful followers led by the Holy Spirit.

The Pharisees in this story weren't wrong for being the teachers and protectors of Jewish law. Most of them were probably good, devout people who spent their lives devoted to their faith and trying to keep it pure. But when Jesus – this brand new picture of God physically present in the world came along – they closed the eyes of their hearts. They figuratively plucked out their own eyes – rather than see that even as their faith went along, something new could also be happening in the interaction between God and humanity. So often we hear people ask the question, "What if it's not God and I believe that it is?" Usually in response to that, you start to see some self-serving interests going on in a person's life that boils down to worship of self instead of worship of Christ. Perhaps the better question, which the Pharisees failed to ask, and which we don't nearly ask often enough is "What if it is God, and I believe that it is

not?” In which case, we limit the opportunities the good Lord puts right in front of us because we don't think it's from Him.

People can be so self-confident, so sure of themselves. So sure of everything. The Pharisees were certain that God didn't work on Sundays. They were certain that Moses was the only spokesman God had. They were sure that anyone born blind had to be a sinner. And I've been told this in my own lifetime – “God won't use you, you're a sinner.” If I would have known back then all the stuff I know now, I would've asked them to explain the perplexing Biblical example of St Paul. See, spending time in the presence of Jesus Christ changes us into different people than who we used to be.

Rinsing the Mud from Our Eyes

You can't “have your cake and eat it, too,” if you're only living looking at black-and-white absolutes of right and wrong. The older I get, the more I realize that in most every situation there's a varying mix of shades of gray between the two ends of black-and-white. Perhaps instead of an exclusive, exclusionary relational view of the grace of God poured out through the shed blood of Christ, He wants us to take a more inclusive view towards relationships with others unlike us. What I'm saying is, hate the sin, love the sinner. And here's what I mean in practical terms. We have brothers and sisters sitting in churches here in Shelby County this morning worrying about if they're one of the 144,000 listed in the book of Revelation. They see that and think that's the grand total of all the people since the beginning of Creation who are going to get into heaven. They want to know if they're good enough.

They forget about what the writer of Hebrews says, “Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God,” (Heb.12:1-2). Perhaps the completely different thing we're seeing might be from God. Maybe God is a God of both/and, and not either/or, and in the realizing of it, He'll help rinse the mud from our eyes, and the eyes of our brothers and sisters so we're able to more clearly see the depths of His love poured out from the cross upon all humanity!

Prayer: Discerner of hearts: You look beneath our outward appearance and see Your image in each of us. Banish in us the blindness that prevents us from recognizing truth, so we may see the world through Your eyes and with the compassion of Jesus Christ who redeems us. Amen.