



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**"I Can See Clearly Now"**

**John 9:1-41**

**Will Sparks March 30, 2014**

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Do any of you remember these kinds of pictures on posters that came out a while back. Usually they are pictures like this but apparently hidden in them you can see an image- at least somebody can. I can't ever see anything. How many of you can see the images in these kinds of pictures? They tell me that if you start looking at them with your nose right up to the picture and then slowly move back away from the picture you can see something that doesn't immediately appear at face value. Maybe so, but having never ever seen anything, that just feels like an elaborate way to make me feel humiliated.

There is a particular kind of madness related to these pictures. Some see, and some are blind, For those who are able to see, it is obvious, and for those who are blind, the existence of an image behind the image feels, well, a bit mad. And it is all a matter of perception.

I was reading the story of a prison chaplain who spent much of her time dealing with a slice of our community that is often perceived as pretty rough, pretty tough, pretty tragic, messed up... She went into her time as a chaplain expecting to see harsh people. And the more time she spent there, the more she realized that she was not dealing with the clever Jackals and the parasitical vultures of society, but rather, she saw a wide spectrum of wounded and broken people- wounded and broken by others and by their own actions- people whose faith struggles and insights were profound. What you initially see is not necessarily what you get. There is more to this picture than first meets the eye.

Sometimes what we actually see in each other and what we see in the world is not simply something we have a kind of native ability to see, like the ability to see images within a picture, but rather what we see is a human construction, lenses we wear, either given to us through our upbringing or lenses we have chosen. And our scripture reading for the day is a classic and beautifully crafted story of Jesus revealing that reality. Let's look at it.

The story begins with a theological question from the disciples: There is a man who is blind- unable to see, and they immediately ask if this is caused by sin, his or his parents. Jesus says, "of course not." Clearly 2000 years ago, it was commonly held that illness, or physical anomaly had a moral or spiritual root. Not so, says Jesus, but it is an opportunity for God's glory to shine- and he offers healing, and the man is healed.

So from here on in the story, people are trying to explain what happened and "what does this mean?!! The man's explanation is consistent and just the facts: I was blind, he put clay paste on my eyes, I washed. I can see. Simple.

First the neighbours take a shot- it must be a different guy- "nope. It's me alright."

Then the Pharisees take a go at him and here is where they layer on the theology and politics. Healing is a spiritual thing, and our job is to make sure it happens according to the rules. Jesus did it on the Sabbath. That goes against God's teaching. Who does he think he is? Meanwhile the healed man is left wondering, "why are you making this so complicated. I was blind; I can see; what's the problem?"

Then they go to his parents. Is this your son; was he really blind; what is your explanation. The parents have no easy explanation, but they are baffled by the questions. Ask our

son. He was there. Then they go back to the son. How could this happen? It doesn't fit our neat categories.

This story the physical change is simple: I was blind; now I see. But you can see the layers of meaning people are trying to place on that simple situation. The disciples initially want to give it a moral layer- who sinned. The neighbors see it as a social thing- is it really him? Does this now mean we have to look at him differently- maybe feel less pity for him. How do we treat him now? For the Pharisees there are theological and political implications. And in the end, after giving all these layers of meaning a good working over, this cleverly crafted story reveals the perceptiveness of the blind one, and the blindness of the ones who thought they saw things clearly- had it all worked out. And the closing question is left hanging in the air: "Surely we are not blind, are we?" That feels like the question of the day. In what ways do we see the world through lenses that actually make it harder for us to see ourselves, each other, the world as God sees it.

I watched "The Dallas Buyers Club" the other day. This is the Oscar winning story of Ron Woodruff, an outrageous rough electrician and rodeo enthusiast who contracted HIV in the 80s, lost all his friends, and was forced to confront his anti-gay attitudes as he ventured into relationships with others with HIV. The film is based on a real person, and though it alters the real story significantly, it shows the stark reality of shame and stigma faced by people with HIV in the 80s and sometimes even today. Many were seen as reaping the rewards of a sinful lifestyle, many were isolated from friends and family. And if you listen to our friends in ACPNet, people with HIV continue to struggle with fear, misunderstanding and prejudice. If you have a thick skin for the courser side of life, watch it and see how the lens of shame and judgement works.

Two weeks ago, the world bid a final farewell to the founding pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church, Fred Phelps. Pastor Phelps was a virulent activist against gay and lesbian people and fomented hate that often took a very personal form, protesting funerals, schools, concerts brandishing signs like "God hates fags" and other hateful messages. Although his message was clearly fringe, he inhabited an edge of society that wants to wear the lens of moral judgement.

As stark as these two examples are, the truth is, we all wear lenses and we all have blind spots. We all make judgements of people in situations we don't understand. Whether it is cultural differences, ethnic differences, racial differences, or differences created by illness, we all have blindnesses. The gospel story calls all of us into the question of the Pharisees: "Surely we are not blind... are we?" Are there elements of what we believe about God and the human condition that make us pre-judge others? Are there elements of our culture that blind us to the richness of another? Are there elements of our up-bringing that colour our way of seeing? The gospel calls us to a radical openness to humanity in another, to the creation of community with circles of people willing to share their lives, their humanity, and to seek a depth of relation that is honest, open, respectful, compassionate.

This morning we baptized Riley and we prayed that the Spirit of God would work in and through her in her life. We prayed for her family. I also pray that the Spirit of God will work in the community and the world around her, so that the world she inherits, the Christian community that helps Kelly and Renee to raise her is one that constantly asks, we are not blind, are we- that constantly longs to see more clearly, more the way God sees. I think God wants Riley to grow up in a community willing to question our assumptions about each other and to change our perceptions. I believe God wants Riley to grow up surrounded by people who dare to see the world without prejudice. I believe God wants Riley and all our children to be immersed in community willing to define family the way Jesus defined his circle, where simply being a child of God, and that includes all of us, gave you a place at the table. I believe God wants all our children to grow up in a community that is willing to be real community, not pseudo-community,

that means community willing to ask, Surely we are not blind, are we?, willing to ask if we really dare to see each other and ourselves the way God sees, and therefore, love each other and ourselves, and the person who walks through the door, and the person just arrived from some other part of the world, and the person sleeping under the tree out back, the way God loves. And if we can do that for Riley, we will have fulfilled our mission as the body of Christ in this place. Amen.