



# The Trinity Pulpit



**Sightseeing**  
**John 9:1-12, 24-25**  
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I like to go sightseeing. I like to take the less traveled road and just wander. If you are like me, you like to travel to places you have never been before and see things you have never seen. There is something about sightseeing that broadens our thinking, understanding and expectations. We can see pictures of other places, but we all know that being there and experiencing other cultures, places and people really does make a difference in how we view the world. I think it is important to go sightseeing spiritually. It is important for us to open our eyes to the possibilities of God. It is easy for us to suffer from tunnel vision. Our routines, obligations and tasks can begin to close in around us and we can miss opportunities to mature spiritually.

Our text today is a story of one man's lucky day. A man who had been blind from birth seems to be in the right place at the right time. We do not get any indication that he has been following Jesus or looking for Jesus. We get the impression that he was just there. There seems to be a sense that he had accepted his life's lot. He was blind. He had been blind since birth. The darkness was all he had experienced and he did not know any other experience except his blindness. The community and his family had accepted this man's existence. They knew him as the man who was blind since birth. But this day would be his day. This day would be the day he encountered Jesus, and that would change his life. His life, in some ways, would be changed for the better. He would be able to see. He would have the ability to gaze upon the faces of his parents. He would be able to put a face with all the voices he had known since he was a child. He would be able to see the sights as well as hear the sounds of Jerusalem. He would be able to see this wonderful city with all of its richness. But not everything would be good for this man when he received his sight. Because there were those who could not "see" for their own blind assumptions, this man would suffer the consequences of being cast out of his own spiritual

community. This story does not end as a happy story. This story ends with the blind man able to see and experiencing a life transformation with Jesus, but it will cost him other relationships.

I want to suggest to us today that the blind man was not the only one who was blind in this story. There were many who needed to do some sightseeing. In this story there are three distinct communities who are blind spiritually and almost miss or do miss the marvelous act of God's grace and healing. All of these are blind because of some false assumptions they have made. It is hard to relate to others without preconceived notions about individuals, communities and situations. However, it is important if we are going to experience God's grace and healing in our lives that we make an attempt to put aside some of our false assumptions so we can truly see.

Freeman Paterson is a photographer who explains his method of taking pictures this way:

Letting go of self is an essential precondition to real seeing. When you let go of yourself, you abandon any preconceptions about the subject matter which might cramp you into photographing in a certain, predetermined way. ...When you let go, new conceptions arise from your direct experience of the subject matter, and new ideas and feelings will guide you as you make pictures. Preoccupation with self is the greatest barrier to seeing and the hardest one to break.<sup>1</sup>

What are some of the preconceptions we find in our text that we, too, might find in our own thinking that keeps us from really seeing?

The first misconception we find is one expressed by the disciples. As Jesus and the disciples are going along they see the blind man

who has been blind since birth. The disciples ask a question which seems to be the right question and yet reveals the problematic assumption. They ask, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (v. 2) It is a logical question and one that anyone would like to know the answer to. Life would be so much simpler if we had all the answers to the “why” questions. We, like the disciples, struggle with situations in which there seems to be no direct correlation between cause and effect. If we could only know the cause, then many times we can live with the consequence. We might not like the consequence, but at least we can wrap our minds around it when we have a cause. We just can’t understand why a tornado hits this house and leaves that one. We don’t understand why a drunk driver takes this road and not another. With all of our medical knowledge we still have those moments when one’s illness or disease seems to have no direct cause. If we could just have the answer, then we could cope with the effect.

That is all the disciples are asking. Give us the cause of this man’s blindness. If the man had not been blind since birth, then the answer would have been easy. The man obviously had sinned in some form or fashion, and his judgment was blindness. But the man had been blind since birth. Some explained this as the man had sinned in the womb. The Pharisees thought this possible. They pointed to Esau and Jacob’s struggle in the womb of Rachel as she was preparing to give birth. (Genesis 25:22) Others thought that someone’s birth defect was the result of the parent’s sin. God was judging the parent by having the child be born with a defect. So, which one is it, Jesus? Is it the sin of the parent or the man which caused this blindness?

Jesus does not give the explanation they wanted. In fact, he says it is neither the man nor his parents but that so the glory of God might be revealed. (v. 3) Jesus’ answer does not explain the cause, but it does create purpose. Jesus’ answer rectifies the false assumption the disciples had made about God and how God works. The disciples were concerned about judgment and Jesus reveals that God is more concerned with caretaking. God’s work that day was not to point the finger but to touch a life. That is the work that Jesus had come to do and was calling his disciples to do. The disciples were blind that day to what God was doing because they had a false assumption about the priority of God.

There are moments when we could all use some sightseeing when it comes to God’s priorities. We are like the disciples in that when confronted with situations, we many times assume the role of judgment or at least the role of discernment when, in many cases, God is calling us just to care.

Dwight and Linda Vogel tell of being with Mother Teresa and being asked to pray for her and the others that they would be faithful and not interfere with God’s work. As much as Mother Teresa was admired for her work with the poor and dying, there were some who wanted her to be more outspoken about the causes of disease and suffering. However, Mother Teresa was more concerned with caring for those who were suffering than exploring the cause. The Vogels write in their book *Sacramental Living*, “Mother Teresa’s request presupposes that God is active and that we only muck up the situation when we forget that our understanding is partial. We must avoid the temptation to play God!”<sup>2</sup>

Some of us might be called to address systemic problems which create suffering, but the truth is most of us on a

day to day basis are called to address the suffering before us. We might not hold the dying or care for the orphan, but before us everyday are those who are suffering and hurting. Jesus’ response was to remind his disciples that they needed to see beyond the man’s blindness and truly see the man. Many times we miss God’s work because we have made the assumption that God is more concerned with the cause than the suffering person. We must also be honest and admit it is easier to serve on a committee to discuss missions than it is to do missions. It is more glamorous to discuss the politics of poverty than to work with those in poverty. Jesus reminds his disciples and us that God’s priority, God’s work, was the man who was blind.

There is a second false assumption made by another community in our text. That is the assumption made by the blind man’s community. We are told that after the man encountered Jesus and was obedient to Jesus’ instruction that he came from the Pool of Siloam with his sight. When he returns to those who know him, they are divided on whether this is the same man. Many doubted that this was the same man. They were not convinced that a man blind from birth could see. The text reads, “His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, ‘Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?’



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Some claimed that he was. Others said 'No, he only looks like him.'"(vv 8-9)

The implication is that those who knew him one way could not accept that the man could now be different. Those who knew him formerly or had experienced him formerly could not imagine such a change. They had seen him as a blind beggar, and in their minds he would always be a blind beggar. This image of his personhood was so etched in their minds that they denied the possibility that God could reverse his blindness. The community was blind that day to what God could do in the present and future because of their past experience. They needed some sightseeing of their own.

The past is a powerful influence. If you don't think that is true, all we have to do is look to the political process. Any time someone decides to become part of the public arena, their past becomes either their ally or their Achilles' heel. Many times it does not matter who a person is now. Their past can influence the opinion of others so much that the past becomes that which rules a life more than the present or the future. This is true not only with public figures but with friends, family members and other church members. A past indiscretion becomes common knowledge, and forever a person is judged by that one incident. A person struggles with a certain behavior or sin, and even after they are forgiven and years of transformation by God, we find it hard to forgive and believe that people can change.

Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, writes in I Corinthians 6:9-11:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexual immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the Kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Don't miss what Paul is saying. People can change. The past – that which is formerly known – does not dictate the present or the future when God is invited into the situation.

John Ortberg tells the story of a man he calls Dr. B. Dr. B was a Christian professor that the church had

called in to teach about becoming a community of grace. It seems that a local Baptist church was being bombarded by new members who brought with them some habits, lifestyles and living arrangements that were not acceptable to the good Baptists of the church. Dr. B was brought in to straighten everyone out. A question came from the back for Dr. B. "Dr. B, is it not right that they should clean up their act before they come to church?" That is when Dr. B became passionate. "If you want to go to church where such people are not welcome and never darken the door, you will find many such churches in the city and you may attend there if you wish. But who will welcome those who are far from the church?" Then Dr. B whipped off a long string of adjectives to describe people. Dr. B said, "What about the chain-smoking, adult channel watching, Playboy reading, whisky guzzling, wife swapping, tax cheating, child neglecting SOB?" Everyone was shocked by hearing such language from the professor. Then out of the back came a comment from one of the deacons, "You mean sons of Baptists?" Who will welcome the sons (and daughters) of Baptists?<sup>3</sup>

We miss God's work because we let the past dictate the possibilities of the present and the future. How many people have we known "formerly" who we have decided can never be different even after they have encountered Jesus? Someone's past need not dictate their future.

The same is true in our own lives. We must never make the false assumption that our lives cannot change just because they have always been this way.

The man had been blind since birth and yet, in a few short hours, everything changed. Our past does not have to determine our present or our future. Let us never forget that the gospel of Jesus Christ is that all things can be new. Let us never forget that God is at work, even now, recreating our lives and the lives of others. We are all in process and we must not look to our past or the past of another as the determining factor of what God can do. God will not be limited by the past. We need some sightseeing with Jesus so that we can see others and ourselves differently.

There is one other false assuming group in this text. It is the Pharisees. They decide that since Jesus healed on the Sabbath that he must be a sinner, and God does not use sinners, so the man's story must be untrue. The Pharisees say to the man, "Give glory to God for we know this man is a sinner."(v.24)



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The Pharisees had decided who God could use and who God would not use. We place ourselves in a very dangerous place when we assume the role of God and begin to declare who is worthy to be used by God and who is not. It is interesting that the response of the man is not a theological argument about healing on the Sabbath. Instead, his response is testimony. He responds, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (v. 25)

There are always those who would disqualify others from being used by God. They might say you are of the wrong gender, denomination, background, education, or your process makes them uncomfortable. What is our response to such accusations? It is not an argument. You cannot argue with a closed mind. It is simply to be faithful. Jesus was faithful to his calling and task regardless of what his detractors had to say about it. The former blind man would not let the Pharisees opinion steal his joy. He would be obedient to Jesus and he would tell his story.

There are those who might assume that you cannot be used by God. They might tell you that there is nothing special about you or that you don't fit the right mold. Don't be baited in to an argument, just be obedient to your call, and as the old hymn says, "Keep telling the story, be faithful and true, and let others see Jesus in you." The Pharisees needed to go sightseeing that day. They had become blind by assuming they knew exactly who God could and could not use.

There were three assumptions which led to blindness that day. The disciples assumed the wrong thing about the priorities of God. God's real work was caregiver. The community assumed that one's past dictated their present and future. They were reminded that people can change. The Pharisees assumed that God could only use those they approved. They were reminded that God is at work and willing to use all who will be obedient.

What false assumptions are we making that are keeping us from truly seeing the work of God? Let's take some time and open our minds and hearts to God and go sightseeing.



#### References:

- 1 Freeman Paterson, *Photography and the Art of Seeing* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1965), p.9.
- 2 Dwight and Linda Vogel, *Sacramental Living* (The Upper Room, 1999).
- 3 John Ortberg, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get To Know Them* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), pp.96-97.

