

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, March 26, 2017**

Rev. Andrew Reid

**I Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41
“Sight and insight”**

Sight and insight. Vision or blindness. Light or darkness. Looking on the outward appearance or on the heart. Fearing no evil, even when walking through the dark places where evil lurks. The works of darkness, in stark contrast with the fruit of the light. Acts done in secrecy and shame, or made visible in light. The blinkers of fixed ideas producing a refusal to accept facts in plain sight. Controversy and confusion, belief and disbelief, disagreement and argument.

No, not the news headlines on the state of federal politics, in Canada or anywhere else in the world. But who says Scripture has nothing relevant to say to the world today? Today's lessons present us with a set of enormously rich passages to ponder. How to get to grips with them?

I want to concentrate on the Gospel this morning, because that may be the richest text. And what I want to do is look at the incident through the responses of three groups: the blind man's community, the religious authorities, and his family. Because for one reason or another, they all seem to fail the man.

Reduce the story that John records in the Gospel passage to its absolute basics, and what are we left with? A man who was born blind is suddenly and apparently miraculously given the ability to see. And the only people who can understand how or why are Jesus and maybe the man himself. I say maybe the man himself because he seems to waver. One minute he argues that Jesus must have divine powers, or at least be a prophet. The next minute he is saying that the one thing he knows for absolute sure and certain is that he used to be blind, but now he can see. And of course, as he usually does, Jesus uses the incident to teach people then and now

something about God and life in God's realm.

So: the response of the man's community. They knew him as the blind beggar. That's how they had known him all his life. And it seems that they found it impossible to see him as anything but the blind beggar. After the man went and washed in the pool of Siloam as Jesus told him he *came back able to see*. *The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.'* Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him" John 9:7-9.

Is it him? Yes, it is. No, it isn't. Yes, it is. But it can't be. He's not blind. But it is him. Why was it so hard for them to recognize him? Was it because they saw only his disability? Was the fact that he was in some way different the only thing they could ever see in him? Some of you know the story of my dear friend and colleague, Rev Dr Chris Vais, who died in 2002 of ALS. When Chris was in his wheelchair in a restaurant, he would often find that the servers would ask his wife, Susan, what he wanted to order. To Chris's delight, because he had a wicked sense of humour, Susan would either say she didn't know, or simply shrug and say nothing, until the server realised what was going on, looked beyond Chris's apparent difference, and spoke to him directly.

Question: who are the people we do not see because we are blinded by external things?

Next: the response of the religious authorities. The Pharisees immediately started to debate what had happened. On the face of it, they were just trying to make sense of the incident in terms of their understanding of God and of life.

But the fact is that what they were actually doing was trying to make the incident fit their understanding of God and of life. There were certain things that they had fixed in their minds, and they had to twist and bend

and shape the facts of the incident to fit those fixed ideas.

Fixed idea #1: someone must have sinned for the man to be born blind. And since he was born blind, that proved that it must have been his parents who had sinned.

Fixed idea #2: blind people could not see, so if he could see now, then he must not really have been blind at all.

Fixed idea #3: no-one who was sinful could perform a miracle; every human being was sinful; Jesus was a human being; therefore Jesus could not have performed the miracle. It didn't matter how often anyone said that he had – he just couldn't have.

Fixed idea #4: they were right, and anyone who tried to argue with them must be wrong. And anyone who was wrong must be put out, turned aside, chased away, driven off.

Question: who are the people we do not see because we are blinkered by the rigidity of our own ideas and concepts?

And lastly, the response of his family. One might have hoped – one might even have expected – his parents to be happy that their son could see. But there is no indication in the Gospel that they were. Rather, what we read in the Gospel suggests instead that they really didn't want to have anything to do with him and the whole incident. All because they were afraid of the Jews.

So when they were summoned to appear before the Pharisees and be questioned by them, they acknowledged that yes, he was their son, and that yes, he had in fact been born blind. But they had no idea how he could now see, nor who had given him sight. And they told the Pharisees to go and ask him directly, because he was a grown man and able to speak for himself. Their fear for their own safety overwhelmed any joy

they might have felt, and they turned their backs on their son.

Question: who are the people we turn a blind eye to because we are afraid of what others may think?

Deborah Kapp, Professor of Urban Ministry at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, writes this in her commentary on this passage:

The community fails. The religious authorities fail. The family fails. The only trustworthy figures in this story are the man born blind and Jesus. The man tells the truth, and even in the face of threats, the abandonment of his community and family, and expulsion, he sticks to his guns. I was blind, but now I see.

Again and again and again, the man witnesses to the saving grace he has experienced in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the only one the man can trust, and he is the only one we can trust in this story. Although the Pharisees lay claim to dispensing grace, it is Jesus who transforms. It is Jesus who heals. It is Jesus who stands with the man in his final isolation. He stands with us too.

As he stands with all the children of light, *for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true* Ephesians 5:9.