

“Seeing Isn’t Believing”

When William Montague Dyke was ten years old, he was blinded in an accident. Despite his disability, William graduated from a university in England with high honors. While he was in school, he fell in love with the daughter of a high-ranking British naval officer, and they became engaged. Not long before the wedding, William had eye surgery in the hope that the operation would restore his sight. If it failed, he would remain blind for the rest of his life.

William insisted on keeping the bandages on his face until his wedding day. If the surgery was successful, he wanted the first person he saw to be his new bride. The wedding day arrived. The many guests--including royalty, cabinet members, and distinguished men and women of society--assembled together to witness the exchange of vows.

William's father, Sir William Hart Dyke, and the doctor who performed the surgery stood next to the groom, whose eyes were still covered with bandages. The organ trumpeted the wedding march, and the bride slowly walked down the aisle to the front of the church. As soon as she arrived at the altar, the surgeon took a pair of scissors out of his pocket and cut the bandages from William's eyes. Tension filled the room. The congregation of witnesses held their breath as they waited to find out if William could see the woman standing before him. As he stood face-to-face with his bride-to-be, William's words echoed throughout the cathedral, "You are more beautiful than I ever imagined!"

Author Kent Crockett, who tells this story in his book, “Making Today Count for Eternity,” writes: “One day the bandages that cover our eyes will be removed. When we stand face-to-face with Jesus Christ and see his face for the very first time, his glory will be far more splendid than anything we have ever imagined in this life.” Our scripture for the day is about a man who was healed from blindness. That’s the obvious story - but it’s much more than that. It’s about people who are not only physically blind, but those who are morally and spiritually blind as well. To help understand the healing of the man born blind we should look at one of America's most popular hymns. I have to have the Bulletin information to Jean by Tuesday, or I would have put this hymn in for today’s service. That hymn is "Amazing Grace."

It may seem as American as cheeseburgers, potato chips and Baseball. But it is actually is a British hymn. It was written by an English clergyman named John Newton who experienced a dramatic conversion. In his early adult years he was a slave trader, involved in the selling of people. It's an insight into sin to notice that while he was involved in slave trading, he saw nothing wrong with the practice. But, when Jesus came into his life John Newton was convicted of his own sinfulness and turned his life around. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me" is John Newton's life story.

As Newton read the ninth chapter of John's gospel, he saw himself reflected in the experience of the man whose eyes were opened. When the formerly blind man was asked the source of his healing, he responded with the words Newton used in his hymn, "I once was blind, but now I see." Though John Newton was not physically blind, he was morally and spiritually blind.

This is the key to understanding this story. Jesus teaches us that there are many ways that we can be blind. The first people blind in today’s Gospel story were the disciples. There are several things we now take for granted: ramps, curb breaks, braille signage, leaps in medical science, broader special education, closed captioning,

assistance for the hearing impaired and designated parking spaces. These are all relatively recent developments that acknowledge the place of persons in our society who once were relegated to the fringe of society.

As the disciples walk with Jesus through Jerusalem they come upon a blind man, and then proceed to talk about him as if he wasn't even there! They reflect an insensitive mind-set to those with limitations and disabilities. The disciples start to speculate on the cause of his blindness. They wonder, "Is he blind because of something he did or blind because of something his parents did?" In Biblical times, conventional wisdom held that if you had something "wrong" with you, it was the result of sin. Now I could go into last week's sermon of how nothing can separate us from the love of God - but you can read that on-line or get a copy from the narthex.

But in Biblical times they did believe that your handicap was punishment for something you must have done wrong. The man blind from birth - presented a perplexing problem for the disciples. How could he have sinned before he was born? Or, as many parents in today's world wonder - had they done something so awful that the result would be a child born blind?

At a conscience level, we may no longer buy into a world-view which says that every problem or disability is the result of sin. But, when we are caught in a perplexing problem for which there is no apparent cause, then we begin to speculate, "What could I have done to deserve such a fate?" Now, we do acknowledge that many of our problems, if not most of our problems, do have a cause. As it's often been said, "We can't go against the grain of the way the world works and not expect to pick up splinters." However, there are situations, like the situation of the man blind from birth, for which there are no apparent answers.

I was glad to see that Jesus refuses to enter the debate as to the cause of the man's blindness. Speculation about the cause is a waste of time, especially when there is opportunity to make the situation better. Jesus understands the man's blindness to be an opportunity for healing and teaching. Jesus introduces the theme of light coming into darkness - into the story. The story now has a new dimension. The man blind from birth has lived in total darkness and Jesus uses his coming to sight, coming to light, as a metaphor for what Jesus is doing in the world. Jesus is coming as the light of the World to lead God's people out of the darkness.

He starts out by removing the darkness of the belief that a person's problem is a result of their sin or their Parent's sin. To prove this, he heals the blind man to prove that it wasn't God who wanted him blind, it was simply an infirmity that needed to be cured. So he physically removed the darkness from the blind man who now saw the brightness through sight. They point out in the Gospel that it was the Sabbath when Jesus healed the man born blind.

This opens up the old argument of healing on the Sabbath when they said this was breaking the commandment to keep the Sabbath Holy. The Pharisees were blind to the fact that the Sabbath was made for man - not man for the Sabbath. The Pharisees still were blind to the fact that Jesus healed this man who they thought was blind from birth because of his sin or the sin of his parents. But they acknowledge that healing comes from God and if this man called Jesus did heal the blind man, he would be a man of God, but he healed on the Sabbath which would make him a sinner. They were confused, or blind to the facts. So the one who was blind could now see, and those who could see were now blind to the truth. Seeing isn't believing unless you are seeing through the eyes of faith.

In the book "It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It" by Robert Fulghum. Author Robert Fulghum tells this story of one of his professors, a wise man whose name was Alexander Papaderos. At the last session on the last morning of a two-week seminar on Greek culture, Dr. Papaderos turned and made the ritual gesture "Are there any questions?" Quiet blanketed the room. These two weeks had generated enough questions for a lifetime,

but for now, there was only silence. “No questions?” Papaderos swept the room with his eyes. So, I asked. “Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?”

The usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go. Dr. Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was. “I will answer your question.” Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter. He held it up and said “When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. “I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine - in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

“I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light, truth, understanding, knowledge is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it. “I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world, into the black places in the hearts of men, and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of life.” And then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them on my face and onto my hands folded on the desk.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world” (John 9:5) He came to shine Light into places of darkness. Shine light onto the false belief that illness is a punishment from God. To shine light into the dark places of abuse, discrimination and rejection. To add light to the Scriptures that were being Mis-interpreted to meet the needs of people instead of the purpose of God. And as his followers, we are to be like that little mirror, reflecting the light of Christ into the dark corners of the world. That is the meaning of the Christian life.

To go to those who may have physical sight but are spiritually blind. Give sight to those who are blind. “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven” Amen