

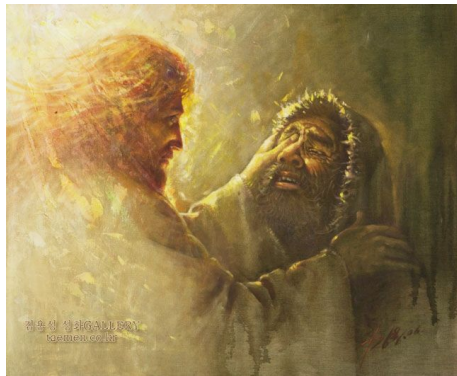
“Sight Restored”

Rev. Stephen Milton
Lawrence Park Community Church
Online service, March 22 2020

Scripture: John’s gospel, chapter 9: The blind man cured.

Today’s scripture reading is from the lectionary, which is planned years in advance. No one knew that we would be reading this story in the midst of a pandemic. However, this morning, Christian churches all over the world are hearing this tale of the blind man who was cured, and who then faced a chorus of doubt and condemnation. It is a surprisingly apt story for a time when this pandemic is sowing fear all over the world. But to see what insight this story brings to our situation, we need to back up a little bit.

In the chapter right before this one, Jesus has been arguing with the Pharisees. He has told them that if they were really the religious experts they say they are, then they would recognize Jesus as one sent from God. But instead, they deny that he is from God. They know what a Messiah will look like, and he isn’t it. Jesus and the Pharisees agree that in Jewish law, no new fact can be considered true unless there are at least two witnesses, two people who can offer testimony. Jesus says he has it – himself and God. The Pharisees are not convinced.



So, in the next chapter, we hear of this curious story, where Jesus heals a man who has been blind since birth. When his disciples ask, why is this man blind, was it he or his parents who sinned, Jesus replies that he is blind so Jesus can make a point. Unlike the other healing stories in the Bible, Jesus doesn’t ask the man what he wants, he just heals him. Then Jesus leaves the story until the very end. This man can now see. That is the fact before the court of public opinion. The question is how the public will react to this healing.

The reaction proceeds in three stages. The first is uncertainty. The people who have known this blind beggar are confused. His neighbours who have known him since birth say, yes, this man was blind, but now he can see. Others say that is impossible, this man must be someone else, he just looks like the blind man. So there is no consensus. *Uncertainty* reigns.

The next stage entails bringing this new situation before the local religious experts, the Pharisees. They want to establish the truth, so they ask for the parents to come forward. Is this your son, was he blind before birth? Has he been healed by Jesus? Jewish law requires two witnesses to establish a fact, and here are two parents who testify that their son was born blind and now can see. So, by the standards of the day, the truth has been established, the healing is a fact.

But now a new element creeps in: fear. The parents are afraid they will be kicked out of synagogue and their Jewish community if they say Jesus healed their son. They know the local Pharisees have been denouncing Jesus. So they have to weigh the truth – that Jesus healed their son – with the trouble they will get in. So, they take the safe route – ask our son, he can speak for himself, he’s old enough.

So uncertainty has been replaced by a fact wrapped in fear. Now, the Pharisees question the man who has been healed. The man only says what he knows. I was blind, Jesus healed me, now I can see. That’s it. Just the facts, ma’am. But for these Pharisees, who were a very small group, maybe 6000 in all of Israel, for this handful of Pharisees, this new fact does not compute. They have already decided that Jesus’ claims to divine power are false, and a threat to their own religious authority. So, instead of rejoicing or marvelling at the fact that this man has been healed, they denounce Jesus. He shouldn’t have healed on the Sabbath when no work is allowed. He isn’t a prophet. And then, they turn on the blind man, they shoot the messenger. “You are a sinner, you don’t know what you are talking about!” They re-establish their authority by kicking him out of the local Jewish community, so by the end of the episode, he is alone until Jesus finds him.

The scripture passage is telling us that when a new fact emerges that doesn’t fit with power’s idea of reality, there will be uncertainty, followed by fear, followed by condemnation. That’s how a fact is rejected when it is threatening to the powers that be.

2 We are now all living in a period defined by fear and uncertainty. Instead of meeting in church together, you are at home, and I am facing a camera. All over the world, the Covid-19 virus continues to spread across every continent. The number of infected rise hourly, as does the death toll. We are living in an unprecedented situation where mass deaths are occurring in many countries. We have been confronted by a new fact, this virus, and it is redefining our world.

As we all know, the virus first appeared in China, in the city of Wuhan, a place few of us had heard of before.



Scientists believe the epidemic began at a live animal market. Creatures like bats and anteaters are kept in cages, close together, far from their natural habitat. It appears likely that the virus passed through two animal species and then jumped into humans at the market. ¹

Doctors first started noticing the virus’ effects around Christmas time last year. Patients started appearing in

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/03/16/coronavirus-fact-check-where-did-covid-19-start-experts-say-china/5053783002/>

hospitals with a serious lung infection. Like the people in our scripture story, their first reaction was uncertainty. Is this something new, or just a normal lung infection? Doctors sent samples to several labs. For some doctors, it was clear that this was new, and troubling. Dr Li Wenliang mentioned his worries to his friends, fellow medical colleagues in late December. He and others then told their superiors, who told government disease control officials.² By the end of the year, labs had confirmed that the virus was new, related to, but different from SARS.

At this point, it was still possible to shut down the virus and keep it local. Had a serious quarantine been administered at this early stage, and information shared with international health organizations, it seems likely that Covid-19 could have been contained. But covid-19 was discovered in a society where the citizens live in fear of their government, and government officials live in fear of their superiors. In a tyranny like China's, if you embarrass the mayor, or the local governor, you get in trouble. So it is easier to suppress bad news.



So, in late December, uncertainty led to fear of getting in trouble. Only a few doctors dared to report the existence of the virus. And, like in our scripture story, fear led to condemnation. Local Chinese officials sent police to tell doctors to stop talking about the virus. The government's own health departments told labs to stop testing for the virus, and to destroy any samples they possessed.³ Instead of accepting the new fact, the Chinese government tried to

silence the messengers. They were more interested in maintaining their reputation than in protecting their own people.

Although our scripture reading today was written 2000 years ago, it contains a key insight which is still true today: the desire for self-serving power is blinding. When governments are more interested in self-preservation than their people's welfare, they will be blind to the implication of facts.

This is not just a problem with the Chinese government. The next terrible outbreak of the virus occurred in Iran, another nation founded on fear and distrust. One month before the virus arrived, the government lied to its citizens about shooting down a passenger plane. When people started getting deathly ill, the Iranian government sent security forces to tell doctors to keep quiet about the virus.⁴ They were told to falsify death certificates to hide the severity of the outbreak. Once again, fear and condemnation ruled when confronted by an unwelcome fact.

² By Gao Yu, Peng Yanfeng, Yang Rui, Feng Yuding, Ma Danmeng, Flynn Murphy, Han Wei and Timmy Shen,, "How Early Signs of a SARS-Like Virus Were Spotted, Spread, and Throttled," Caixin, Feb 29, 2020 <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-02-29/in-depth-how-early-signs-of-a-sars-like-virus-were-spotted-spread-and-throttled-101521745.html>

³ By Gao Yu, et al.

⁴ Farnaz Fassihi and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Iran's Coronavirus Response: Pride, Paranoia, Secrecy, Chaos," New York Times, March 9, 2020

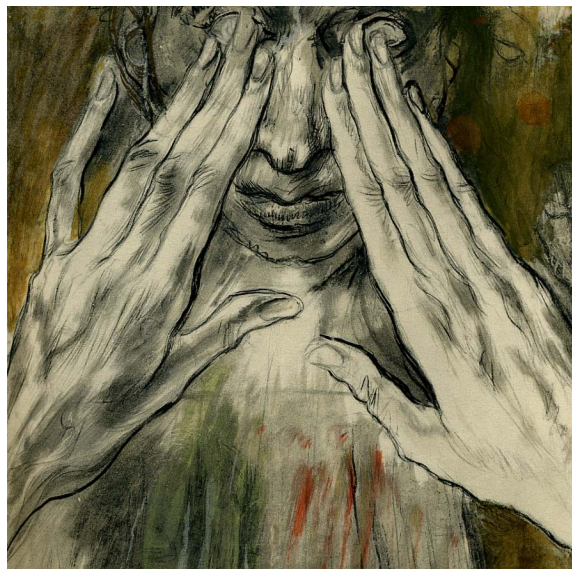
Facts do not speak for themselves, as the blind man discovered. When people cling to power for themselves rather than to help others, facts will be denied and messengers will be punished. Trust is eroded, making rational decisions impossible. In 2018, a study was conducted that asked citizens in the West whether they trusted their governments to provide health care advice. The two countries who trusted their governments the least were Italy, followed by the United States.⁵

Donald Trump has spent the last four years encouraging citizens to distrust their government, and to doubt facts. When the pandemic arrived, he dismissed it as fear mongering by the Democrats.

Doubt, fear, condemnation. Facts do not speak for themselves. Our fate lies in how we think, whether our minds are open, or self-serving and closed.

When societies are based on fear and distrust, we collectively lose the ability to think straight. What we need is to calm down, to emerge from the darkness of fear and mistrust. What we need is a way to see the world differently.

3 And that's what Jesus offers in the story of the blind man. He offers a different way of seeing the world. At the beginning of the story, he cures the man's blindness in a curious way. In other healings of blind people he simply touches their eyes.



But this time, the gospel of John tells us that he spits into some dust and he rubs it into the man's eyes. It's a curious detail. But if you recall the first chapters of Genesis, God molds the first human being out of muddy dust.

So, in this story, we are being told that Jesus is not so much healing this man's blindness, but finishing his creation by giving him the eyes he was always meant to have.⁶

It's a lovely image: Jesus comes to give us the sight we were always meant to have, but which we lost along the way. We have been stumbling in the darkness of fear and mistrust, but those who

follow God will see in a different way, the way we were always supposed to see as human beings.

⁵ Kristjan Archer and Ilana Ron-Levey, "Trust in Government Lacking on COVID-19's Frontlines," *Gallup*, MARCH 20, 2020

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V, ch15:2.

And what is that different kind of sight? The rest of the Bible tells us. Know that you are loved by God. Share that love with others. Take care of the people who are least powerful in your society and everything else will fall into place. Don't pretend you can do everything on your own, be open to God's help. This is the path of love which our faith tells us is the real source code of the world. It is why trees drop more seeds than they need to reproduce, so other species can feed on them. It is why there is air to breathe and water to drink, all for free. We live in a world that is good, and where God wants to take care of us, and we are invited to lovingly take care of each other.

But the scripture is not naïve. Those who follow God's path will meet with opposition. The blind man's new eyes earn him nothing but derision, and by the end of the story, he is rejected by his parents and shunned by the religious authorities. But not by Jesus. Jesus reappears at the end of the story to welcome the man for telling the truth, and for having the spiritual sight to see who Jesus is, even though the others cannot.

So what are we to do now, as Christians, in this time of darkness and pandemic? I hope it is clear that fear and distrust will not help. That's how we got here; it is not the way forward. As Christians, we must now show our love and care for each other more than ever. We are entirely justified in feeling scared, this a truly terrifying situation. But we must fight fear with love and faith. So, we have been busy this week setting up ways for you to connect with God, even though you can't come to church. In the announcements later in the service, I will outline all the new ways we have created this past week, so that you can sing, pray and meditate with us from home. We know that you need your church and faith more than ever, so since you cannot come to us, we will come to you, using the internet. And we will also help you connect with each other through the church. Last week, during our first online prayer service, at the end people just hung around to chat and catch up. We will find more ways for you to do that while we are all living in isolation. We have also established a new pastoral care buddy system, so we will be calling you to check on how you are doing. We want to keep in touch, to hear your fears, provide hope, and offer help when you need it.

As a church, we have also been thinking about we can do for the community around us who are suffering most during this crisis. If our building is needed by the community during this crisis, we will try to help in any way we can.

We have also been thinking about the plight of the most marginalized in our society, the homeless. They have no home to go to self-isolate. Homeless advocates like Cathy Crowe, who was here at Soul Table in January, have suggested that now is the time to buy tents and sleeping bags for the homeless. They need a place to stay, away from shelters, where the virus will easily spread. This week, you will receive a fundraising letter from us with specific suggestions on how to donate funds and used tents to help the homeless.

Jesus has told us that there is a way of seeing in times of darkness. Love is the answer. The love of God for us, and God's love shared through us to each other. So let us choose to see with

Christ's eyes of love, to spread light to each other. Only love can conquer fear, only light dispels darkness. Let us see with these new eyes Jesus has given us.

Amen.