

“Wiping the Mud From Our Eyes”

John 9:1-42

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It wasn't exactly a day at the spa, was it? The mud on the blind man's face wasn't applied by a well-manicured, Swedish massage therapist to treat some newly formed wrinkles. It wasn't made from the bottom of a river especially known for its curative powers. It wasn't washed off with sparkling mineral water and a clean white towel. No, this mud came from street and spit, smeared on by calloused hands. It stayed on, growing dry and crusty, while the blind man made his last stumbling and careful journey in darkness to the communal pool of Siloam, probably enduring some mocking along the way for looking so silly, where he himself would wash it off in water dirtied by countless other citizens. No white towels in Jerusalem that day. No, it wasn't exactly a day at the spa, but oh how refreshing!

We wonder, of course, at the things this man must have seen for the first time, how he would even have been able to find his way back home, so different now was his view of the world. He had, after all, been born blind, and never seen Jerusalem's streets, its faces and markets, its dirt or its water. He wouldn't even have known his parents if they came walking up to him in the street. Sure, he had familiar touchstones, smells and sounds, habits and traditions to guide him, but he was now in a completely new world full of new opportunities. He would need

teachers and friends to help him make sense of his suddenly wide-open community. He would need the people in his life to adjust to the new man in their midst. He would need to reassess the direction of his life and to make decisions for himself that he'd never made before. It would all be a process, to be sure, but one he was glad to be undertaking, for not only did he have his sight, but he also had the beginning of his vision.

Last Sunday evening, we heard photographer DeWitt Jones tell us that a key component in vision is our perception of the world. "When I believe it, then I'll see it," was one of his main points, distinguishing himself from the more skeptical whose perception is limited by the belief that "I'll believe it when I see it." Perhaps I should have waited until tonight to show that video since tonight's Lectionary text is one which deals with seeing, and indeed vision. There is, of course, a great deal of difference between sight and vision, even if we often use the words interchangeably. Sight refers to the biological processes of the eyes and brain interpreting the reflection of rays of light bouncing off of objects. Sight has to do with color temperatures and wavelengths and corneas and optic nerves. Vision refers to the capacity to see things both for the way they truly are and the way they could be. Vision is about seeing patterns and possibilities, and things the eye can't see, like hope, grace, and love. Sure, we can see with our eyes concrete expressions of those abstract things, but it takes vision to integrate them into our lives. It takes the light of the world illuminating them for us to see them, but there they are in

plain sight. If you've watched any of those forensic police shows on just about every night on television, CSI or the others, you've see the investigators with their special ultraviolet instruments that reveal what cannot be seen under normal light. In a similar way, it is Christ's light that gives us vision to see what cannot be perceived with even the best set of eyes. At our awakening to Christ's presence in our lives, we are fitted with a kind of Christ-o-vision goggles that allow us to see what went unnoticed before – the Spirit's movement, the power of prayer, the need for spiritual discipline. This is the vision the man born blind began to develop even as his eyes were taking in all they could handle.

This distinction between sight and vision is of course, the content of the great debate which follows the man's trip to the Pool of Siloam. The Jewish leaders are stuck on the man's sight, while Jesus is focused on his vision. Even the man himself took a little while to come around to knowing the difference, although surely he must have begun to be aware from the beginning. We are told that in the end he believes that Jesus is the Son of Man, and that he worshipped Jesus, an act of response as much to vision as to sight. The Jewish leaders on the other hand, never catch the vision and remain, in the words of the story, blind. They are without the vision of the Kingdom even though they think they control it. We are too, of course, when we are a little self-absorbed, pigheaded, or pursuing our own ends, but their lack of vision is a chronic, rather than acute, condition. And it is the chronic lack of vision with which Jesus is concerned.

Over the last several weeks, and last Sunday in particular, you have probably heard the word vision used more frequently at ECF, as in, “we are seeking God’s vision for ECF.” We have embarked on a process of careful listening to God that we might discern more specifically how we are to be, and use, the “heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ” to not only bring sight to the blind, but Kingdom vision who lack it. Tonight’s story is one of those Biblical texts which gives inspiration to our understanding of our mission. You see, Christ calls us to the very same type of ministry, using our hands in service of those needing Christ’s hands, just as Christ used his own hands. But tonight’s story also has something to say to our efforts to discern God’s vision for our congregation, an effort in which I hope you will all participate, and it is on that subject that I would like to say a few more words, words which I hope you will see also apply to our individual lives as well as our life together.

First, I think it will be important for us going forward to keep in mind the distinction the Gospel story makes between sight and vision. As we seek a directed use of our hearts, hands, and voices, it is tempting to take a look around us at the needs which exist and simply choose one to address, perhaps the closest one, perhaps the most pressing one, perhaps even the one most people agree upon. There is no lack of need in Costa Rica’s English-speaking community. There are prisoners needing visits, tourists being robbed, children needing mentors, new residents needing new optometrists and all the rest of the needs which could fill a

very long list. And we could make a significant impact on all of those needs if we put our minds to it. But I would submit to you that if we stop at assessing the needs and then choosing, we will have only exercised the power of our sight, and failed to apply our vision. For even though the choice we could make might be a worthy one, it may not be the one God wants us to choose, or the one which best uses our gifts, or the one which glorifies God to the greatest degree. It will require our vision, in addition to our sight, to discern the vision God has for us.

Let me pause for a moment and clarify the word vision. In the Gospel story tonight, as I have described the difference between sight and vision, vision is being able to see things through the eyes of faith, to see beyond the everyday into the eternal. When I speak of God's vision for our church, I am referring to something of the same species, but understanding God's vision as that destination to which we are being called to journey together, the dream of God realized for our church. It will take our eyes of faith to perceive God's vision for us, and we will need our sight to help us along the way, but we journey together towards God's vision for God's people. The same is true for each of our individual lives, that God has a dream for each of us according to the purposes for which we were called into the Kingdom. It is the journey of a lifetime to live into that dream, and a journey which cannot be undertaken without both sight and vision.

More specifically, I want to lift up the act of Jesus' healing of the man born blind to say something about the process. Unlike many of the other healing stories

about Jesus, there is a period of time between Jesus' action and its results. Frequently, we read the stories of those upon whom Jesus lays his hands as being healed immediately. Jesus touches a leper in Luke 5 and "immediately the leprosy left him." A hemorrhaging woman touches Jesus garment in Luke 8 and not only does Jesus feel just then power being drawn from him, but "immediately her hemorrhage stopped." Something different takes place in our story tonight, something I think applies importantly to our efforts at discernment. Once Jesus has spat upon the ground, and mixed up the mud, and applied it to his eyes, the work is not finished. The man does not yet have either sight or vision. First he must go and wash the mud from his eyes in the Pool of Siloam, and then he will have both. Jesus does his part and asks the man to do his. John is clear that the man does not receive his sight *until* he washes. Something is required of him to complete what God, through Christ, has begun.

This is not so much different than ECF's process of Vision Discernment. It is not as if God could not simply and suddenly impart to us the vision, the dream, and relieve us instantly of our blindness, and maybe it will happen more quickly than any of us think. But I believe that we will be like the man born blind who needed to do his part too, and we are at the point where God has smeared mud on our eyes, and we are making our way to the pool at Siloam. When we get there, when we wash the mud away, we will begin to see clearly how to live our common

life together, just as the man was able to see how to live his life in a new way, both practically and spiritually.

We can only speculate why Jesus sent the man off to the Pool of Siloam to do his part, instead of healing him on the spot. The story doesn't say. But I like to think it was Jesus giving the man a little transition time, a chance to look forward to the possibility of a life transformed, a taste of hope, so to speak. You see, it wasn't a day at the spa. It was a life changing experience, in more ways than one. In our case, I like to think that God is giving us the time and the space to come to terms with what it will mean to be more focused in our ministry, to give us a taste of hope. There is value in the waiting between the alpha and the omega. That is the nature of Lent. That is the nature of God. If we could absorb all there was to know about God in an instant, I daresay our hearts and brains would explode. But God's grace gives us both sight and vision at the rate we can accept it. May this time of wiping the mud from our eyes be the blessing God intends it to be. Amen.