

## Seeing-Faith—Or Not Seeing – Judy Cox

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

In the last month we've all had strong opinions about the blindness, or sight, of our national leaders. So you'd think the pastor making the preaching rotation would have more sense than to schedule herself for today!—way too much in these texts about the short-sightedness and blindness of **religious** leaders! To make it even funnier, I had to switch to this Sunday due to a schedule conflict earlier this month—with a conference for Free Methodist pastors/religious leaders! So here I am, set up to be my own sermon illustration...

Now if I'd considered these texts beforehand I could've dodged better; I guess you could say I was "in the dark."

Blindness and sight/darkness and light—the Gospel-according-to-John uses these paired opposites a lot. But problems with seeing show up in our other texts too. Let's start with them. Our Old Testament passage shows Samuel sent to *Jesse the Bethlehemite* because, as God explains, "I have seen among his sons a king for myself." Over and over through wordplay these verses contrast human-seeing with God-seeing. Samuel assumes he has, by years of experience as a prophet, learned God's perspective. Of course he knows what God looks for in a king! King Saul is tall and striking—his replacement must be, too! But God keeps opposing Samuel's impulses: "No, not this guy." (Tall must not equal "stunning" to God.) "No, not him—nor him..." On and on it goes, one impressive brother after another, passed over. Not only told, but maybe even rebuked regarding the difference between God's seeing and his own, Samuel hears, and we hear: *the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.* In humility Samuel has to lay down his own claim to perceptiveness and discernment—admit his own blindness, if you will—to learn God's intentions. Finally, the youngest brother is called in from the fields, and we learn that he is, literally, "good for seeing"! Yes, God sees in David something important, though invisible to God's prophet, which is missing in all the previous brothers Samuel had preferred. Our human seeing is blind in comparison with God's sight.

And Scripture interprets me, challenges me to wonder, is it "even" the religious leader, or "especially" the religious leader, who is most tempted to wrongly assume insight into God's perspective? Ouch.

Note an unexpected tone of humility in our Ephesians passage, too. First we are declared, breathtakingly, *in the Lord* to be **light**! Maybe that doesn't sound humble to you. Keep reading: the call on us, even as *light* and *children of light*, is to discern, to **try** to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. No assuming that we automatically know! Sounds a lot like Samuel's lesson...and we'll find the same cautions throughout our Gospel story of a man born blind, and the religious leaders, who prove to be the truly blind.

The Prologue, or opening, of this Gospel starts right in, describing The Logos/Word, Jesus: *The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... The true Light, which*

*enlightens everyone was coming into the world.* In the chapters that follow, including today's, Jesus repeatedly announces that he is the world's Light.

This Gospel also alternates between telling us Jesus's teaching (discourse) and showing us Jesus in action (narrative). So today we have Jesus in action, healing one literally blind (in the dark!) and offering the sight of faith in Jesus the Light to all those in the dark, in whatever ways. In John, sight stands for the seeing of faith-in-Jesus—always relationship, trust, resulting in worshiping and following Jesus. Faith is trust in a Person, not agreement with a set of beliefs. The blind beggar sits in darkness—one of the dark valleys of Psalm 23, perhaps? (Chapter 10, immediately following, certainly shows this man as one of Jesus' attentive sheep!) We see Jesus shepherding him: going to him, providing for him, healing and restoring him, eventually including him in community. Jesus shuts down the disciples' assumption that they know how God works, that this blindness is punishment for someone's sinning. He sets them straight: *Neither this man nor his parents sinned.* Rather, Jesus focuses on the result, that God's activity would soon be *revealed in him*. That is, God's works are healing and restoring! Jesus is bringing light, healing light, in order to reveal fully the God Who so loves the world.

This restored man causes quite a tizzy amongst his neighbors, who aren't even sure it's the same guy. He gives his testimony for the first of what turns out to be FOUR times. We get to watch his journey to "seeing-faith": here he names Jesus as healer but freely admits when questioned further, *I do not know*.

So the neighbors, looking for some "expert" help, take him to the religious leaders, the Pharisees. Now we learn that Jesus had broken Torah in this healing, working on the Sabbath (by making and working with mud, let alone by healing). Oops! Radar alert for the Pharisees! But we see them on a journey too. Some object right off—clearly, not observing the Sabbath must mean Jesus can't be from God. They're certain about their proper interpretation of Scripture—what it says about Who God is, what sin is, and how God works—and that it must therefore exclude Jesus. They make the same assumption as the disciples, that they can, and do, clearly discern the presence of sin. On the other hand, some others are humble enough to ask the obvious question, instead of jumping to conclusions: *How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?* And we see the healed man moving further toward "seeing-faith," calling Jesus *a prophet*.

The religious leaders move in the opposite direction, away from "seeing-faith." (In John the Jewish religious leaders are called, almost interchangeably, both "Pharisees" and "Jews.") They heard the man's testimony (again!) but *did not believe* that he indeed had received sight though born blind. They refused to accept his story, dismissing it (and him) by crosschecking it with that of his parents; the parents promptly and fearfully pointed the Jews back to their son, *He is of age; ask him* (and not us!).

Calling back the healed man for testimony #4, the Jews commanded him, *Give glory to God*—a saying that actually, ironically, means "Confess that you are lying!" They've made up their minds, based on their "inside information" about God, that all this testimony has to be a lie. They've made up their minds about Jesus. *We know that this man is a sinner.* They're hanging on tightly to their theological categories, and embodying refusal to trust, decision NOT to believe

in Jesus. This is refusal to see—anti-faith.

The healed man stands his ground: *I do not know whether [Jesus] is a sinner.* (Is that a “No comment”?) *One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.* When pressed he gets snarky, calling them out about not listening the first three times. *Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?* ALSO—hmmm—sounds like another major step on the journey to faith!

The religious leaders solidify their opposition self-righteously: *YOU are HIS disciple, but WE are disciples of Moses! WE KNOW that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from* (lots of self-centered certainty about their own heritage and knowledge, very little humility). The man counters: *We know that God does not listen to sinners, but does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.* He concludes, *If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.* Bested at their own game of theology, the Jews sputter insults, *You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?* (And we’re back to the wrongheaded theology about sin that Jesus debunked at the beginning!) Finally, they *drove him out.* (The threat expressed earlier, that Jesus-followers would be put out of the synagogue, is real.)

Jesus responds by seeking out the newly excluded man, revealing himself to him as the Son of Man, the “eschatological bringer of salvation” already present. The eager man responds in fully seeing faith—trusting and worshiping Jesus!

The chapter concludes with Jesus unpacking his role as the world’s Light, *I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.* Some Pharisees, self-righteously sure he can’t be referring to them, ask: *Surely WE are not blind, are we?* But Jesus changes all their categories, undercuts all their self-confidence: *If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.* So sin has nothing to do with physical blindness, or any illness, OR violation of the Law—as already shown—but is defined by resistance to Jesus. They’ve repeatedly insisted that they knew Who Jesus could and could not be; in revealing themselves as closed to Jesus, the world’s Light, they are exposed as the blind indeed!

We need to hear the witness of this Fourth Gospel! Sin here is refusal to trust; saving faith is seeing-faith—seeing the revelation of God in Jesus and trusting it, trusting him. Judgement comes, then, not based on what we do, but whether we, seeing and trusting, embrace God in Jesus. Or will we refuse to see, by turning our backs on Jesus?

Much more than interpreting this Gospel, we need to let it interpret us. Isn’t that the danger to which religious leaders fall prey, “knowing” and insisting on our interpretation, rather than letting Jesus the Word, Whom these words reveal, interpret us? Let’s be honest, that’s a danger ALL of us need to avoid!

So who are we, then, in these texts? Can we let them interpret us? Are we able to see our likeness in the certainty and self-righteousness of the religious leaders, whether in Samuel or in John?

Who might we, like them, be overlooking, or excluding, in our blindness? We must get over ourselves to admit our blindness, our need—to let the light of Jesus shine on OUR hearts and cleanse our motivations, our arrogance. But how?

We need to do this together, in community—we need each other! Paul knew this; in our Ephesians text it's in the plural, in community, that we must discern, must *try to find what is pleasing to God!* Wesley knew this, with his insistence on a key means of grace, “Christian conferencing” (read: “small groups”). Hear, from the book Listening Hearts, how Christians outside our Wesleyan tradition strongly agree: “Although God calls each of us personally, as individuals we see only partially. Individual perception, reasoning and understanding are always limited. ... Something happens to us when we consult one another in Christian community. In sharing our thoughts with others, surprising insights often emerge—**opening our eyes** to what we have not seen ... While circumstances sometimes require us to act without consulting others, the danger of arrogance and error in proceeding on our own can be great.”<sup>1</sup>

(So that's why we Free Methodists have Society Meetings, to discern TOGETHER! That's why we need YOU to attend our Society Meeting at 7 tonight!)

We move now, together, from the worship of the Word to worship at the Table. Here, most of all, we come admitting our blindness, our need for the light and love of Jesus. And here, abundantly, that Light is shone, that Love is poured out, and we, naming our blindness, are healed. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> Farnham, Suzanne G., et al. Listening hearts: discerning call in community. Harrisburg, PA : Morehouse Publ., c1991.