

Insight for the blind

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 26, 2017.

One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see. John 9:25

While driving we may experience blind spots in our peripheral vision that prevent us from seeing a vehicle just behind and beyond the range of our vision. We have all had the experience of looking for something and not seeing it when it is right in front of us. When I am looking for something that I know is there, I leave the room and come back in to find it right where it was in front of me. It may have helped to make a quick prayer to Saint Anthony! In the same way, we can have spiritual and emotional blind spots where our otherwise perfectly good sense of vision prevents us from perceiving reality.

In the story of the healing of the man born blind, the Pharisees miss the point entirely. Instead of being glad that he is healed of his blindness, they are more concerned that Jesus broke the Jewish law that forbids healing on the Sabbath. They continue to miss the point by debating whether or not the man's blindness was caused by his own sin or the sin inherited from his parents. In their preoccupation with legal concerns, the Pharisees can't see that the man who was born blind is healed and is now able to see for the first time in his life. He is not interested in speculating about why he was born blind. Nor is he concerned that Jesus broke a law by healing him on the Sabbath. He is just so very grateful that he has been given the gift of sight that makes it possible for him to see for the first time.

Despite the fact that they have perfectly good vision, the Pharisees are blind to the central issue. As keepers of the law, they are trained to reach conclusions through logic and deductive reasoning but are unwilling to see God's healing power working right before their eyes. They miss the point that he who once was blind now can see. He who was lost has now been found.

It is by the grace of God that we are enabled to sort out what is important and what is not, what we need to know and what remains a mystery. Many times the answers are staring us in the face but we are unwilling to see them. What is the use of vision if we have no insight?"

It was once commonly believed that sickness and suffering were the direct result of our sins. They were believed to be God's punishment for our faults and shortcomings. It's not that simple. Jesus teaches us that the rain falls on good as well as on the bad and that bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. Of course it's not fair, but where did we get the notion that life is supposed to be? We have control over some things while having little or no control over other things. There are no easy answers and there simply doesn't have to be a reason for everything.

Think of someone who is challenged with a physical or mental disability since birth. Rather than theorize about why they were born that way, be glad for what they can do to meet their challenges. We all have certain limitations, fears and phobias that challenge us. That is why we pray for the courage to change the things we can and accept the things we can't and the wisdom to know the difference. While we can't change the conditions of our birth, we can overcome inherited traits by building on our strengths.

Fundamentalists need and want quick and easy answers. I have no problem with fundamentalism if by that you mean relying on basic essential truths. I do have a problem with manipulating scripture to obtain convenient easy answers to justify a bias. Violence committed under the guise of religion cannot be justified under any circumstances. The danger of twisted religious extremism is taking advantage of vulnerable people who give unquestioning allegiance and loyalty to those who control them. Political extremists carefully craft traditional religious teachings to suit their own purposes and thrive on paranoia. They claim special insight through a strict and narrow interpretation of scripture and manipulate followers with threat of eternal punishment. Religious extremists have such a strong hold on their followers that they can't think for themselves.

“Islamophobia” is used as a political tool to encourage hatred and distrust. There is nothing in the Koran that teaches death to those outside the religion of Islam. Sadly, the zealous fringes of both Islam and Christianity are motivated more by hate than by faith.

It is by God’s grace that we see and face reality. One of the most popular hymns, Amazing Grace, is about spiritual blindness and opening our eyes to reality. Many of our favorite hymns are frequently sung with little or no attention to the words in the text. John Newton, the author of the text of Amazing Grace was inspired after realizing the sin of his involvement in the slave trade. After being converted during a storm at sea, he admitted that it was God’s grace that, as he wrote, “saved a wretch like me.” He was eventually ordained a priest in the Church of England and became involved in the anti-slavery movement and lived to see Parliament abolish the British slave trade in 1833. Because his eyes were opened to reality, he wrote: I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see. (Hymnal 1982 #671) When you know the background of Amazing Grace, it makes you wonder why it is so popular, especially when played on bagpipes.

Christ heals us of our selective blindness. The more we gain clarity of insight, the more we realize that even the horizon is only the limit of our sight. Pray, therefore, for the vision and insight to go beyond what we are willing to see.