

## What We See When We Look

John 9:1-7 (1-41)

March 19, 2023 *Lent Series Henri Matisse and the Color of Lent #4*

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church, San Rafael, CA

*As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then the man went and washed and came back able to see.*

*John 9:1-7*

Blindness is a popular image in scripture. The psalmist tells us: (146:8)

God opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

God loves the righteous.

And Isaiah is fond of using blindness as a metaphor: (59:10)

We grope like the blind along a wall,

groping like those who have no eyes;

we stumble at noon as in the twilight,

among the vigorous as though we were dead.

Jesus often uses blindness to describe people who may have sight, but clearly have no vision, no comprehension, about who Jesus is or understanding of what God is doing in the world.

I understand why it is such a popular metaphor in scripture. We still use blindness and the verb "to see" metaphorically. When something is made clear for us, we say, "Oh, I see." How strange must that sound to new English speakers when they hear someone say, "I see" over the phone.

And so, as we use blindness in a metaphorical way, I invite us to remember literal blindness and loss of sight and how risky it is to use people's lived realities as object lesson and metaphor. I continue to think about people in my life and our congregation who have had major changes in their eyesight.

This is an interesting biblical story because there are multiple scenes. The whole story is 41 verses. Biblical scholars suggest that we can envision the narrative in John 9 as a drama with 7 scenes.

Jesus heals the man in 9:1-7

the neighbors question the man in 9:8-12

the Pharisees question man in 9:13-17

the Jewish leaders question the parents in 9:18-23

the Jewish leaders converse again with the man in 9:24-34

Jesus revisits the man and blesses him in 9:35-39

Jesus challenges the Pharisees in 9:40-41

Throughout the narrative there are questions. Questions. There are questions that seek to keep us in our place, and there are questions that help us find the place where we belong. Our Gospel reading this week, [John 9.1-41](#), invites us to hear both kinds of questions and to notice the vast difference between them.

John draws us into the story of a man, blind from birth, who has an encounter with Jesus that results in his being able to see. For those who had known the man as a blind beggar, the change in his condition is deeply unsettling. They begin to ask questions, first of one another, then of the man. They take him to the Pharisees, who ask questions of their own. Then they bring in the man's parents and ask questions of them; they, in turn, direct the questioning back to the man. Lifted from their context, here are the questions they pose:

Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?

Then how were your eyes opened?

Where is he [Jesus]?

How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?

What do you say about him?

Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?

What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?

There is a sense of mounting tension in John's story, a steady escalation of frustration and fury on the part of the questioners each time the man responds. He is telling them nothing they want to hear, nothing that fits into the beliefs and experiences that they carry. The newly-sighted man possesses a remarkable sense of calm, answering in the only way he knows how: from his own experience. "One thing I do know," he says, "that though I was blind, now I see."

When the man's inquisitors press further, he finally asks a question of his own. "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" His questions are too much for the questioners. John tells us that they begin to revile the man, finally sending him away.

These questions are not doorways into conversation. These questions are fences, these questions are walls. They are designed to reinforce the boundaries of what these people

already know, and to keep their landscape of belief, experience, and knowledge safely contained.

These questioners are arrogant. It would be easy to dismiss them as the bad guys in this story. Reading this text with the practice of *lectio divina*, however, urges me to consider where I find those questioners inside myself. And I feel a measure of compassion for them, because I know there are times when, faced with something beyond my own experience, I have clung to previous beliefs and understanding. I can stretch and then sometimes fall back to comfort levels.

One of the best practices we can engage in, during Lent or any season, is to ask the questions, of others and ourselves, that expand our vision rather than confining it. Jan Richardson says:

Good questions carry something of a ritual within them, a sense of the sacramental: they do for us what the act of washing in the pool of Siloam did for the muddy-eyed man. Good questions rinse our eyes. They help us practice seeing. They widen and deepen our vision. They clarify our perception of what is present in our lives and of what is possible. They remind us...that we may not always get answers, but asking a good question makes way for a response. (1)

John wants to make sure that we know that Siloam, the name of the pool in which the man washed his eyes, means Sent. Amazing....We are all being sent. Sometimes we are sent beyond the boundaries of what others find acceptable or comfortable or convenient. Sometimes we are sent beyond the limits of our own vision. Whether or not we know where we are going—and sometimes especially when we think we know where God means for us to go—we are ever needful of learning how to see.

Like Jesus with the blind man, God calls us to participate in claiming the vision that God gives us, so that, as Jesus says, God's works might be revealed in us. In order to know where and how and by whom we are being sent, we need to keep visiting Siloam to do the washing that will keep our eyes clear.

John closes this story with questions that are good eye-clearing questions. Jesus, John tells us, finds the seeing man and asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Humanity? (Man?)" He answers Jesus' question with a question: "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." His question leads, not to a wall, or to a law, but to worship.

It's the Pharisees who offer the final line in the long litany of questions that this story contains. Overhearing the exchange between the sighted man and Jesus, they ask, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

Are we?

How well is your soul seeing these days? What questions are coming your way in this season? What questions are you offering? Are they doorways or walls? How do they take you deeper into the mystery of Christ? Are there deeper questions beneath your questions? What questions will help keep your eyes clear so that you can see, and be sent? How are we opening ourselves to the “Light of the World” and reflecting that light back into the world?

Light isn’t only something we see; it’s also the thing that makes it possible to see everything else. Light makes the world visible, beautiful, colorful, and delightful. And the Christ “the light of the world” does this too. When we are mindful that we carry this Christ light in us, we can see the world more clearly in all its colors, beauties, and challenges.

One of Matisse’s central ideas was that painting should be “decorative,” a word that comes from the Latin words *decorare* (“to make beautiful”) and *decor* (“beauty, grace”). Rather than create realistic paintings, Matisse instead made paintings that are distilled versions of reality, like visual poems. These images are strikingly flat, with obvious brush strokes, surprising colors, unusual arrangements, and a dreamlike atmosphere. And for Matisse, the purpose of these paintings is to beautify, to “decorate” the spaces we live in, and so to bring some grace into our everyday lives. (2)

Here are three Matisse masterpieces along these lines. First, *The Red Studio* (1911), which includes many of Matisse’s paintings, sculptures, and ceramics. Notice how the red color helps create a flat, dreamlike, poetic sense of space. Second, our painting today, *Red Room* (Harmony in Red) (1908), in which a wall and a table seem to blend into each other. And third, *Woman in a Purple Coat* (1937), featuring a woman immersed in decorative patterns. All three of these paintings portray the world as drenched in beauty – suggesting that we are surrounded by art, and beauty if we have eyes to see.

What do we see when we look? See only what we were expecting? See the world with awe and wonder? Be willing to see our blind spots and see healing and forgiveness and grace?

Mary Oliver reminds us (from poem *Sometimes*)

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

The man who was blind moves from reporting the facts to awe and gratitude, being astonished, going deeper. Insight, awareness, openness, healing, hope, vision because he felt seen by Jesus. In response to the many questions, he says -

“He is a prophet.”

“One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

"Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from,  
and yet he opened my eyes."  
"I believe."

When you know you are seen and held by Divine love and grace, you respond to good news with joy.

The granting of sight and insight, the restoration of vision, the joy of being lifted up—those are all parts of the spiritual journey.

As we approach Holy Week and Easter, may we ask deeper questions, may we look for beauty and may we have eyes to see. Amen.

- 1) Jan Richardson, "Here's Mud in Your Eyes," Painted Prayerbook, 2.27.08  
<https://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/02/27/lent-4-heres-mud-in-your-eye/>
- 2) SALT Project – Henri Matisse and the Colors of Lent Devotional 2023  
<https://www.saltproject.org/matisse-and-lent/matisse-devotional-for-lent>