

“Only the blind can see”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
March 22, 2020

1 Samuel 16:1-13 and John 9:1-41

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Today, let's talk about what we *think* we know vs. what we *actually* know. Seems appropriate, given the state of utter confusion and panic sweeping the world right now. To kick us off, let's go back a century to another pandemic. It's called, to this day, the “Spanish Flu.” Pop quiz: Where do you think the Spanish Flu originated? Seems easy, right? If you said, “Spain,” you'd be... wrong. Scholars aren't exactly sure where the Spanish Flu originated, but all agree: it definitely was not Spain. Might have been the United Kingdom, might have been China, might have been Kansas. It was World War I, and all the combatting nations were afraid what low morale might do to the war effort, so they downplayed the severity of the situation. Those of you who were paying attention in history class might remember that Spain was neutral, so Spain was one of the few countries openly talking about it. That made it easy for folks in need of a scapegoat to blame Spain and call it the Spanish Flu. Here we are 100 years later, and we're still using that name, still thinking it came from Spain. That's how easy it is to think we know something that actually isn't true.

Samuel was so sure what a king looked like. He looked like... well... the previous king, Saul: a tall, strong warrior, clad in armor. God tells Samuel that God will name for him the one who should be king. All Samuel has to do is wait and let God guide him. But what's the first thing he does? He grabs Jesse's oldest son, Eliab, and says, “I've found him! I've found him!” Eliab was exactly what Samuel expected: tall, strong, mighty. David, on the other hand, looked nothing like a king. He was young, pretty, smelled of sheep, and carried no armor, no sword, just a sling and a harp. He was a musician. Nothing like Saul. And yet, David was the one God chose to be king. Samuel, despite all his confidence, was wrong.

By the time we get to the Gospel of John, Jesus' disciples were so sure that blindness was caused by sin. I hope that sounds ludicrous to us, offensive and ignorant. But at the time, it was commonly believed that illnesses and disabilities were the result of sin. So, when the disciples ask Jesus who sinned—the parents or the blind man—they think they're about to get a pat on the shoulder. Instead, Jesus says: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” His blindness has nothing to do with his moral character. The disciples, despite all their confidence, were wrong.

At the same time, the religious leaders were so sure that Jesus was a sinner because he healed on the Sabbath. He violated the Law. To be fair, the Law stated clearly and compassionately that you could abandon the Sabbath in order to save a life. The catch was that the need had to be urgent. Blindness didn't qualify; Jesus could have waited a day. Thus Jesus broke the Law. The blind

man, however, says: if compassion and good deeds, like Jesus', come from God, how could Jesus not be from God? The leaders, despite all their confidence, were wrong.

This is especially stunning, given that all had good reason to believe these things. They had been taught them all their lives. They had read them in Scripture—or at least that's what they thought Scripture meant. And yet, they were wrong.

Jesus says they're the blind ones. They're the ones making assumptions. They're the ones who can't see the king standing right in front of them, or can't see the beauty and glory of God in a man they call blind, or can't see that healing love was the purpose of the Law from the very beginning—so how could love ever break the Law?

What if we too are the blind ones? We're so sure about so many things, from what constitutes sin or righteousness, to what we think Scripture says, to which politician is right, to the debate over coronavirus. There are Christians who are sure that the faithful thing to do is to continue to worship together in person, even lay hands on each other. They're sure because they "know" that church is four walls and worship on Sunday morning. What if they're wrong? On the other side, I've seen pastors openly deriding churches that choose to stay open—and this was weeks ago, before the recent changes. They did so without any understanding of context, and with a weird self-righteous glee of putting others in their place. What if they're wrong too?

What if something we have held as absolutely certain was completely and utterly wrong? What if the person we've been judging is actually here to reveal God's glory? What if different loving expressions of sexuality and gender identity aren't sins at all, but are the revelation of God's expansive beauty? What if that person who vehemently disagrees with you isn't your enemy, but is actually here to challenge and push you into even greater planes of thinking? What if that person with disabilities we've dismissed for so long was actually put in our lives to teach and lead us? What if they're capable of so much more than we ever imagined? What if God isn't at all what we believe, and what if the first step of faith is letting go of our human ideas, so that the mystery of God can at least speak to us?

It's a scary thing—to stand in uncertainty, to acknowledge that we could be wrong. It's like death: letting go of what was, and not knowing what's on the other side.

But then what do we have to be afraid of? We are a people of resurrection! All life, and all of the gospel, declare that out of death comes new life. Out of darkness, comes light. Comes hope. Comes possibility. When our pride, our certainty, our judgment, dies, Jesus says that out of their ashes a new humility rises. It is here that the blind man says, "I do not know whether he is a sinner." *I do not know*. "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." And what does he see? He sees God in this man they call a sinner. He sees beautiful, misunderstood people all around him. He sees how much he doesn't know, and how that's OK, because that's just a reminder of his need for God—just as Samuel learned all those years ago that he needed God to help him see his future king.

We think people who are blind can't see. That's not true. People who are blind simply look with other eyes. They perceive a world many of us do not. Blindness, deafness, limited mobility, autism, we think of these as disabilities; God thinks of them as unique and beautiful ways to experience and reveal God's creation in ways the rest of us are completely oblivious of. God sees teachers—not only in what they know, but also in what they don't, in the willingness to accept and give help.

Perhaps, wisdom begins with acknowledging what we do not know. Perhaps, faith begins by trusting God to know what we do not know.

There is so much to this world, to coronavirus, to Scripture, to each other, to God that we do not know. Maybe knowing isn't the point. Maybe loving is. And maybe we can't really love each other, or love God, until we stop trying to put them into our little false boxes of certainty, and instead let them be them. Beautiful, miraculous, mysterious them.

I'm not suggesting we shouldn't have convictions or beliefs. Of course we should. Life requires choice, resolve, action. But as we live, we must remain open—to new possibilities, including that we're wrong. Unless we build that possibility, that openness, into the very core of our identity, there will never be room for God to reveal kings and teachers and saviors. We'll miss out on the people we judge, the people we assume we've got all figured out, but who are actually here to bear the glory of God to us, to teach us something new.

Close your eyes. What do you perceive that you have overlooked with your eyes open? Of what have you been certain, which may be wrong? Whom have you judged, who might in fact reveal God's works?

Open your eyes, and remember: only the blind—only the ones who know that their comprehension of the world is limited and thus need God and others to help reveal parts they don't know—only they, only the ones ready to be surprised, only the blind, can see. **Amen.**