

## When Seeing Isn't Believing

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Early on in our marriage, Heather and I decided to subscribe to a concert series featuring different quartets at each of six concerts at the North York Performing Arts Centre, now known as the Ford Centre. These concerts took place on Sunday afternoons, so we would go to church, then have a brief lunch, and head up to the concert in North York. The quartets we heard were top notch and music was consistently fantastic. Sometimes, we would close our eyes so we wouldn't be distracted by the visual aspects of the performance (some performers do move in very distracting ways - we once saw a violist who looked like she was in a rocking chair the entire performance, with the floor being the focal point for her playing). So, we would close our eyes and listen. This allowed us to hear the music with a keener ear. We heard things in the music we probably would not have heard otherwise. Now, anyone who knows human physiology, including Mennonite physiology, knows that Sunday afternoons between 1 and 3 can be a deadly time to try accomplish anything which requires a singular focus, such as staring at a single point of light in a darkened theatre, and it's esp. dangerous if one closes ones eyes. This afternoon period is

actually a semi-sacred time for the traditional activity known in low German as the Meddagschlop, or mid-day rest. Thus, every Sunday afternoon quartet performance we attended became an almost athletic effort in trying to stay awake listening to beautiful music, sometimes closing our eyes to listen more deeply. We once actually bought a 2L of Coca Cola after church that we tried to drink in its entirety while driving to the concert hall, in an attempt to preempt the uninvited nap. Unfortunately, all it meant was that we were the first one racing out of the theatre at intermission to get to the washroom, after pleasantly dozing during the 2nd movement of a Beethoven string quartet.

While exploring the Mennonite tendency of flirting with narcolepsy on a Sunday afternoon may be an interesting anthropological exercise, my point here is rather that, so often in our lives, when we really want to focus on something, we close our eyes and we become blind to our physical environment; we can then concentrate on our other senses. Think of a time you closed your eyes to experience the sound, smell, feel or taste of something. Your physical blindness allowed you to be more aware of something else, and it had more power for you as a result. For example, why do so many of us close our eyes while praying? Do we need the

physical blindness in order to better interact with, and hear, the voice of God? Physical blindness, even temporarily, can lead to "aha" moments of revelation, of enlightenment, as one's energy is focussed on the input to one's other senses. In the case of prayer, and the Christian life, perhaps those moments of physical blindness, can actually help with our spiritual blindness. We don't always see what God sees, and sometimes it takes patience and focus. Focussing, even briefly, on the Word of God, without the distractions of the world around us, can lead to a lifting of the spiritual blindness that can afflict us all. A blindness to the unneeded visual stimuli, while focussing on matters of Christian faith, allows us to deepen our faith.

And so we come to the story of Jesus healing the blind man. In those days, people believed that suffering or a disability of any sort, especially that of blindness, could be attributed to sin, either of the parents, or the person, prenatally. The disciples ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus responds, saying, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Jesus counter-culturally disputes the widely held belief that sin causes disabilities (a viewpoint that lingers to this day), but Jesus doesn't stop there. This is an opportunity to see God at work. He then issues a call to

action. "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." And then, after Jesus talks about being the light of the world, as if to prove his case, he heals the blind man. It's interesting to note that the story doesn't state that the man immediately becomes a believer. This occurs only after the now-sighted man's two encounters with the Pharisees, who, the man realizes, refuse to recognize the power of God at work (by the way, I love the man's cheekiness in his responses this second time - vs. 24-34). The Pharisees are not able to reconcile themselves to the fact that making mud to heal someone's blindness on the Sabbath could be the work of God. They appear to believe alternative facts about who is a sinner and who is of God. The sighted man is thrown out, or excommunicated, from the synagogue. Jesus, hearing of this, seeks him out. It's at this point that the man becomes a believer when he re-encounters Jesus.

When I was a child, it was the actual miracle of healing the man's blindness that most struck me about this story - how does some spit and mud do the trick? As I reread the story now, however, it's the reaction of the characters in the story: the Pharisees, the blind man and of Jesus, that I find the most

intriguing. The blind man has his sight restored, but it's his encounter with the Pharisees, especially the second time, that reveals to the formerly blind man how blind the *Pharisees* actually are. The Pharisees and others really can't believe the miracle, and some refuse to acknowledge it. Their whole worldview is shaken and some can't accept the reality. Jesus' response to this unbelief is strong. To be honest, for the last several weeks I have struggled with the last lines Jesus uses in response to the Pharisees at the end of this story (vs. 39-41). It's the line "If you were blind, you would not have sin." It's easy to understand that the Pharisees' refusal to admit their spiritual blindness is what Jesus is challenging here. It's harder, to understand, though, Jesus's comments: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say 'We see', your sin remains." Is Jesus claiming here that innocent blindness to the truth is a form of disability, but not sinful? And is that refusal to admit spiritual blindness the real disability and a sin? It's at this point in my sermon prep, I told Heather of my struggle with the passage, and she facetiously claimed that Jesus was an abilist, implying that he didn't care for those who refuse to admit spiritual blindness. And then she walked away. So, at that point, I simply wanted to hit the delete key, pick a different scripture and start over. Seriously, though, Jesus is saying he came to help people see the way of God and

restore their faith. His corollary is that his ministry will blind those who refuse to acknowledge the truth and are not open to the moving of the spirit, despite the evidence of God's activity in the world.

Christian faith is not a blind faith, despite the claims of some. Blind faith implies a faith that is ignorant of reality or is not rational. Faith in Christ does not need to be blind, and it can be rational. In fact, if practised well, it's rather the opposite of being blind - it's a choice to commit oneself to Christ-like action in the face of signs that would point you to an alternative path, whether those alternative paths are a Pharasaic tradition, or just floating along the superficial current of mainstream culture. It's actually radical to view, and listen to, other points of view, some of which may be widely-held or culturally acceptable, and then act in accordance with a faith that may be counter to those views, while honouring Christ's example. This can be especially difficult in a culture and society that prides itself on the visual as a primary form of influence to action. Facebook, Snapchat, Pinterest, Instagram all rely on the visual as a form of the primary engagement with the viewer. Now, these are forms of entertainment and connection with others as much as they can be forums for expressing opinions and discord. In the case of the latter, however, there are plenty of

examples, especially in current times, where people have acted upon these forums of visual engagement and made assumptions about appropriate action based on those forums. Without seeking context, many react positively or angrily to what they see, perhaps reinforcing existing mistaken understandings and assumptions. We move into the world justifying our action on what we have seen and read and assumed, in some cases with disastrous results. While acting on visual stimuli alone can be good, an isolated reliance purely on these forums of visual engagement as life's influence points, either as senders or receivers, increases the risk of spiritual blindness. We disconnect from God when we blindly follow the way of the world's visual stimuli alone. Seeing isn't always believing.

We can prevent this disconnection from God by having and applying a faith that calls us to live as the example that Christ sets for us. This is a full-time effort, but also a joyful, freeing one. We are called to live as children of light, as the passage from Ephesians read earlier puts it. Paul writes "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God come on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be associated with them." Don't get sucked in with empty words; don't fall for the simplistic way of seeing the world. Instead, Paul writes, in v. 10, "Try to

find out what is pleasing to the Lord." I love that line. It doesn't make assumptions about what is already known about God. "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." Nowhere else in Paul's letters does one find this line, at least not in the NRSV, about "trying". In fact, in most of Paul's letters, he's pretty direct and prescriptive about what he thinks *is* pleasing to the Lord. To me, this departure from his usual exhortations and admonitions is refreshing. It implies that striving to live up to God's call is a very human endeavour, and prone to failure. Success isn't guaranteed, but the effort is worth it. The Lenten resources for today's service asks us this question: "Do we have the courage, the strength and honesty to notice our own blindness, to look deeply for God's hidden truths right in front of us?" If we are honest with ourselves, if we make the effort, if we try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord, we will find a stronger, richer faith. In all that we do, we are to strive to live a life consistent with the Gospels. Instead of allowing our sight to guide our faith, our faith will guide our sight. Our faith will be the light that allows us to see, to guide our sight. Faith drives vision. Faith enables our ability to see God's will, the True Light. Even when we find ourselves in darkness, our faith can be the light that exposes the way forward.



So, how we do live this life of faith? What does true faith look like? Our current theme, "Credo: Faithful Moorings" invites us to explore the various aspects of our faith, and you have heard others speak on these different aspects. Our theme is connected to our Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective. Today, our call to eliminate our spiritual blindness, our call to true faith invites us to be a disciple of Christ and live a Christian life. Here's an excerpt from our Confession of Faith on exactly this topic:

**Conformity to Christ necessarily implies nonconformity to the world. True faith in Christ means willingness to do the will of God, rather than willful pursuit of individual happiness.**

**True faith means seeking first the reign of God in simplicity, rather than pursuing materialism.**

**True faith means acting in peace and justice, rather than with violence or military means.**

**True faith means giving first loyalty to God's kingdom, rather than to any nation-state or ethnic group that claims our allegiance.**

**True faith means honest affirmation of the truth, rather than reliance on oaths to guarantee our truth telling.**

**True faith means treating our bodies as God's temples.**

**True faith means performing deeds of compassion and reconciliation, in holiness of life, instead of letting sin rule over us.**

**Our faithfulness to Christ is lived out in the loving life and witness of the church community, which is to be a separated people, holy to God.**

Now, this commitment to true faithfulness in Christ, to live as a child of light, is not a barrier to joy, and shouldn't become a barrier to a relationship with others. If we live as a true example of Christ, people will be drawn to us, and want to be associated with what is true and good. Ephesians 5: 8-9 reads "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light - for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true." The parents of the blind man were afraid to say who had healed their son. Fear of speaking the truth to power or fear of the consequences of not following the easy path, not wanting not to disrupt social order, is a natural fear. Those parents were afraid of being ousted from the synagogue. The blind man had no such fear; his experience with the True Light allowed him to see his own spiritual blindness and that of those around him. It allowed him to gain a new faith. Likewise, we are called to True Faith. We are to be restored.

"Sleeper awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Amen.