

“When Believing is Seeing”

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John 9:1-41

*How many of you have **presbyopia**? I admit I do. Presbyopia is the inability of the eye to focus on things up close. Wikipedia states, “Like gray hair and wrinkles, presbyopia is a symptom caused by the natural course of aging. The first signs of presbyopia--eyestrain, difficulty seeing in dim light, problems focusing on small objects and/or fine print—are usually first noticed between ages 40 and 50.” That’s why you see those signs that say, “O Lordy, Joe’s turned forty.” That is a sure sign that Joe will soon be suffering from presbyopia.*

But we don’t have to wait until we are forty to experience **spiritual presbyopia**. No matter what our age, Jesus and his good work can be right in front of our face and we don’t see him. We aren’t able to focus on him. **Spiritual presbyopia** is common to all of us....even the most ardent followers of Christ. In today’s gospel reading we will be introduced to people who assume they see Jesus clearly but whose vision is actually blurred by **spiritual presbyopia**. I can identify with every one of these individuals who don’t see Jesus clearly. *What about you?*

John 9:1-2

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

The first people mentioned with **spiritual presbyopia** are the people we would think would be least likely to have blurred vision.....Jesus’ disciples. They can see his physical body perfectly well but, nevertheless, they experience **spiritual presbyopia** when they accept the common assumption that the man’s blindness was because he had sinned. Their focus is on the problem of sin and they wanted Jesus to clarify who had sinned....the man or his parents. Granted it was the common theology of the day to believe that if one was blind, crippled, or deformed it was the result of sin. The disciples thought they saw the hammer of God’s punishment coming down on the blind man and they wanted to know who had sinned.

This *theologically flawed thinking* is still with us today. In the midst of trauma and crisis, I have heard many say, “*What have I done to deserve this?*” You may know of people who have blamed God for car accidents or see God’s punishment through Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami in Japan or other disasters. It’s probably always been common for us humans to link sin with suffering, as cause and effect. Even Jesus’ disciples needed their spiritual vision corrected. This is what Jesus taught.....

³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.

Jesus restores his disciples’ spiritual eyesight by insisting that sin did not cause the man’s blindness and, essentially, telling his disciples to quit looking for someone to blame. Refocus on the good that God will accomplish from the man’s blindness. This man’s blindness is God’s opportunity to reveal Christ as the light of the world! *May God give us spiritual eyes to see Jesus!*

⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

We are now introduced to another group who had *spiritual presbyopia*...the blind man's neighbors. They can see that the blind man's sight has been restored but they are wearing *the dark glasses of skepticism*. They question whether or not this man was really the blind beggar. **"Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"** ⁹**Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him."**

The shadows of skepticism prevent the neighbors from witnessing the joy of a man who sees for the first time. The impossibility of such a miracle is all the neighbors can see and they get bogged down in a neighborhood squabble. How often has our own skepticism...our own *spiritual presbyopia*...prevented us from praising God for the good work God is doing right where we live? We live in an incredibly cynical world and, as cynicism infiltrates the church, it clouds our vision of the One who continues to open the eyes of the blind all around us, all of the time right where we live. *May God give us spiritual eyes to see Jesus!*

¹³**They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.** ¹⁴**Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.** ¹⁵**Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."** ¹⁶**Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath."**

The Pharisees, church leaders of their day, were blinded by rules. Their *spiritual presbyopia* prevented them from seeing beyond what *they* considered to be church proper. They missed the celebration of a blind man receiving his sight because they focused on rules about the Sabbath. Pharisees put rules above a genuine God event. Their pride prevented them from seeing the real Jesus. They could only see Jesus as a rule breaker.

Anytime we care more for our rules than people we have serious vision problems. Anytime we elevate "*decently and in order*" over a movement of the Spirit we are suffering from *spiritual presbyopia*. Anytime we are more intent on critiquing how the sacrament of Communion is served, rather than communing with God we are candidates for spiritual eye surgery. Our sense of proper religion can blind us to the real presence of the radical Jesus just as it did the Pharisees. *May God give us spiritual eyes to see Jesus!*

The Pharisees were bound and determined to trap Jesus, so they called the blind man's parents and asked them, ¹⁹**"Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"** The parents, shaking in their sandals, seem to hang their son out to dry when they reply, **"We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."** Then we are given a glimpse of the pressure the man's parents were under. ²²**His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.**

The *spiritual presbyopia* of the blind man's parents, caused them to cover their eyes in fear. They affirmed that their son could now see but they were afraid to say anything positive about Jesus lest they be put out of the synagogue. What we have a hard time comprehending the importance of the synagogue to the Jewish people. Being a part of the synagogue was like oxygen is to our body. To be excommunicated from the synagogue meant communal and spiritual death. They would be shunned by family and friends and they would be shut off from God. It's not like our day when people hop from church to church. In Jesus' day it was risky business to affirm Jesus in the context of the synagogue!

While we aren't afraid of being put out of the church, we are often fearful of being seen as religious fanatics. Fear has shut the mouths and squelched the witness of many Christ followers and, at times, I would imagine that includes us all. *May God give us spiritual eyes to see Jesus!*

Oh, to be able to see like the blind man. In reply to the Pharisee's questioning the man stated, ²⁵**"I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."** He was certain of one thing. Once he was blind but now he could see. And then, just when he didn't think life could get any better, he was doubly blessed with 20/20 spiritual vision. He was about to have the eye opening experience of his life.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" ³⁶He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." ³⁷Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." ³⁸He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

He now meets the One who first opened his eyes and this time Jesus opens the eyes of his soul! Jesus delivers the man from spiritual darkness. And the man is so overcome with gratitude that he can do nothing but fall down and worship his Lord and Savior. He sees Jesus clearly as the One who is the light and life of humankind....Jesus is the one who came into our world so that those who do not see may see clearly.

³⁹Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

Jesus gives sight to those who know they are blind....those who know they don't have all the answers....those whose back is against the wall....those who suffer and question and yearn for understanding and hope. Yes, Jesus comes to the humble....to those of us who know we suffer from *spiritual presbyopia*.

On this day, April 3, 2011, when many of us come to worship with hearts filled with sadness over the deaths of *Garland Wright, Jr.* and *Marguerite Bowden*, how good it is to know that Jesus comes to us when we don't see clearly to give us the assurance that one day our darkness will turn into the light of day. *What better place than the sacrament of Holy Communion to have our eyes opened to the true, life-giving Light? May God give us spiritual eyes to see the real Jesus!*

Prayer

Amen