

“Was Blind, But Now....”

Psalm 23; John 9

March 30, 2014, “Friends and Family Sunday”

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Many here know that I am an advocate of writing. We aim for accuracy in all our written communications--weekly bulletin and monthly newsletter, website, Facebook, internet groups. And I expect people to read. Some of you also know that we have had sound system difficulties. Rachel Merva, coordinating the effort to address this, asked those involved if they'd suggest other people who might be helpful. Ever helpful, Dr. Riccardi suggested that we add Mr. Mike Raffone to the group. Rachel asked Mary Lou Kampert, our Administrative Assistant, and me for contact information for Mr. Raffone.

So it was delicious irony that Rick later asked Rachel why she hadn't gotten back to him about his suggestion, the humor of which, as she wrote to me, “sailed over her head like a 747:” to which I could only think: “Mine, too.” Say it with me: “Mike Raffone.” (microphone). Was blind, but now I see.

“There are none so blind as those that will not see” is an old proverb. That is part of the irony of today's Gospel: a man born blind “seeing” clearly, both literally and spiritually; and his accusers, who should have had 20-20 spiritual sight without corrective lenses, appear to be blind as bats. “Blindness,” spiritually speaking, is more than just the failure of the optic nerve.

What *about* this man? We know he was born blind but in every other way it intimates that he is normal. He could hear, taste, smell and feel. But sight was a gift he did not have. One could argue that isn't all bad. The prejudices that come with sight—of race and culture, of clothing or jewelry, of the kind of car we drive or the neighborhood we live in—would have made no difference to him.

Yet anyone with blindness knows the handicap it is. To many of us, Pastor Hal is a daily inspiration with his macular degeneration, a malady my late mother also had, and overcame as best one can. So has Pastor Hal, with his teaching and pastoral ministry that blesses us. Unlike these saints, the man born blind had never seen ANYTHING: the beauty of a sunrise, a great work of art, waves crashing on the seashore, a child's first steps.

His handicapping condition, and the discomfort it causes in some of us, reflects in the disciples' question to Jesus: "*Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" An odd question: unless you believe that everything is "cause-and-effect." Cause and effect. Bad things happen to bad people. Good things happen to good people. In a cause-and-effect world, everything is orderly, predictable, understandable. If you study hard you excel. If you work hard you prosper.

But Jesus resists that. He says the man's blindness is so the works of God might be revealed in him. Strange? Our final hymn, "Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross," reveals the work of God by the blind Methodist hymnist Fanny Crosby. She was rendered blind at six months old but yet wrote so many hymns—over 8,000—that she had to use over 200 pseudonyms in her career since publishers did not want to include so many hymns in their hymnals from a single author. The long-time Bridgeport resident's financial legacy lives on in the senior care facility in Shelton, Crosby Commons, whose Director of Spiritual Life, the Rev. Jim Stinson, is with us today. The works of God can be revealed in our disabilities.

The man in the story does not remain blind: the "work of God" of which Jesus speaks. Ancients believed the spittle of a holy person could heal. So Jesus spits into the clay, makes a mudpack and—BEHOLD!—the man could see. Colors and birds and waves off the Long Island Sound. Is the word "ecstasy" large enough to capture the moment?

Occasionally such sight is not the blessing we think. A “Modern Family” television episode depicts Jay, the much older husband of Gloria, trying to convince her to wear glasses. Her vanity and fear of aging causes her to resist. Finally, she does: and recoils in shock when she realizes just how old Jay looks! Any resemblance to me and First Lady Carol is strictly coincidental!

Sight can lead us into temptation. At least it did for the clergyman who decided on a fair Sunday morning to skip church and play golf, rasping into the phone to his lay leader that she would need to cover the service. Lining up the first tee, he could see the flag waving from the cup on the green several hundred yards off. About that time, Satan said to God, “Hey, God, isn’t that one of yours down there?” God looks out over the battlements of glory and sighs and says, “Yes.” “Well,” Satan grunts, “aren’t you going to do something?” About that time the Reverend swings the club back and hits the ball straight off the tee, exactly where he envisioned it would go: up the fairway, past the water hazard, over the rough, up onto the green, slowed toward the cup, caught the lip, rolled around and fell “Plop!” into the cup. A hole in one.

Satan, disgusted with the whole affair, says to God, “Now look what you’ve done! How can you let him get away with this?” And God replied, “Ah! But who’s he going to tell?”

The restoration of sight should mostly prompt ecstasy. Yet those who should have been ecstatic—the spiritual leaders of the community—instead launch an investigation. Is this really the man born blind? And who is this Jesus? All that is wrong with religion comes into view: fear, power and control, lack of faith. Interrogating the man’s parents proves fruitless. In desperation the inquisitors, unable to name the healer or discredit the healing, call the man back again. “Tell us what happened.” And the once blind man gives as simple an answer as you and I could imagine: “I was blind, but now I see.”

So I wonder, on this Friends and Family Sunday, about the blindness you and I have that is not a failure of the optic nerve. Do we look away when we see another who is different? My brothers and I are struggling to get my 90 year old father—who is suffering from Parkinson's disease—to regularly use a cane. You and I both know that a part of his resistance is the perception that he is now feeble. So I ask you to pray for him and for me as we re-enter those tough negotiations tomorrow, so that a catastrophic fall that could be avoided will not come to him because of his pride and the prejudice of others. And I ask that we pray for one another, that the Pharisee that lives in all of us, that looks on outward appearances and judges our self and our neighbor—who are also sometimes our family and friends—will be silenced by the miracle of God's powerful movement in our life.

The story of John Newton is well-known, popularized in our time in the 2006 movie "Amazing Grace." If you haven't seen the movie, do. Captain of a slave ship, he was converted, left that evil life, and became cleric in Olney, England, where he not only wrote "Amazing Grace" but worked for the eradication of the British slave trade with William Wilberforce, M.P. I am excited that our Confirmation class, without prompting from me, chose to address human trafficking—today's slavery—as their mission project. Initial details are in today's program and more will follow.

The Good News of today's Gospel is that not only was the man's optic nerve healed, but he was given spiritual sight of his Savior. Whatever spiritual blindness we carry we can bring to God in Jesus Christ who will enlighten our eyes, lighten our load and inspire us to reach out with healing and hope to others. This, truly, reveals the glory of God in us. Amen.