

March 30, 2014 1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23, John 9:1-41

Learning to See by Faith

Some of you may spend part of your day sharpening your mind and math skills by doing puzzles – that is if you are not already pouring over calculus or engineering problems. One of my favourite puzzles is the Eye Twister where you have to compare two pictures to find the 8 differences. The first time I tried these puzzles I thought they were ridiculous, like something you would do in grade 2 or 3, for I would look and look and not see much difference at all, except where it appeared to be a problem with the printing – missing lines, dots, edges, numbers of hairs, toes, waves, birds etc. That little man certainly comes in many different disguises!

Then I realized that that is exactly what I was supposed to be looking for. It is amazing to me how hard it is to actually find all 8 differences, and how the mind seems to fill in what is missing because it is supposed to be there. For instance, if the circle in one picture is almost incomplete, your eye and your mind will complete the circle for you so that you cannot really see the error at first glance. It takes patience and self-discipline to learn to see in new ways, especially to see our own mistakes.

We all know that there are different ways of seeing, not just the literal seeing of lines, and dots and objects, but seeing in the sense of understanding, having insight, seeing into the future, seeing into the heart of a person, or the heart of an issue, seeing into your own assumptions and values. The story that John has written about the healing of the man born blind is so much more than the story of a miraculous healing, for it touches on the connection between seeing and becoming healed, not just for one individual but for a family, a religion and a whole community. The connective ingredient is faith.

It seems that everyone is affected in this healing story - the man who was born blind, who often seems treated more like an object of debate than a person; the disciples, the neighbours, the Pharisees who are divided on the issue of his healing, and the man's family and of course, Jesus. The literal reality of this man's healing of his sight seems to set off a fire storm of questions: Why? When? Where? How? Who?

Disciples - "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This may seem like a narrow minded question but don't we do this as well when we make assumptions about someone's upbringing, or their DNA, or the country they came from to account for certain illnesses or behaviours.

Jesus – sees this blind man as a person in his own right who deserves to have his vision restored. He sees him as someone worthy to be healed – to reveal the work of God, the intention of God that everyone would find wholeness no matter who they are.

Neighbours – once the man is healed and is no longer begging beside the road, they question if it is still the same man! Half of them don't even recognize him anymore. It makes me wonder how often we might know someone with problems, an addiction, a personality type and how we might resist the person changing for the better, letting them grow up, evolve, become a new person, especially if that person claims to have found God in their life! Then they begin to question and doubt how he became healed and who could have possibly done this for him. What were the credentials of the practitioner?

Pharisees - they ask how he has received his sight and from whom. They question how a healing could occur on the Sabbath which was to be a day of rest and not work. Rules, structures and a bit of being tied to the bureaucracy seemed to keep them from appreciating the importance of the individual person and his need for healing. To them,

Jesus seemed to be making light of the importance of the Sabbath, the foundation of their relationship with God.

I hardly want to touch this group of people because it almost touches too close to home, working in a church as a clergy person with our love for creeds, correct beliefs, polity, procedures, structures and buildings. I imagine that those of you who work in business, school boards or the government would have your own systems that have guided your thinking, planning and actions. Someone who comes in to turn things upside down, or who questions your good work or way or doing things, especially by singling out individual rights over the collective rights, is not always welcome.

In the United Church (as in other denominations) we are moving into a time of upheaval and change as new more streamlined ways of being the church are explored, ways that seem to be breaking free from our long held traditions and ways of being church, if not Christian. Instead of having a General Council, Conferences, Districts or Presbyteries, there is talk of being a Denominational Circle, creating new more fluid forms of what is called Connectional Space that rely heavily on technology and creating a College of Ministers. The foundation would still be vibrant communities of faith which are sounding more independent than we already are.

I must admit that I can identify a certain amount of fear and anxiety as I contemplate this new vision of how we will be church in the future, even though I know and see the need for change, for being more able to be spirit led instead of so controlled by rules and procedures. It is hard to feel confident, secure and at peace when the ground we are standing on is shifting, when we cannot always see the way forward. We know that this is happening in so many areas of life and our world as old structures, economies, ways of communicating, change and emerge into new ways of being connected. And really it is

only by questioning, wondering out loud, and challenging authority even, that we can begin to see, to understand, to know for ourselves what the truth is, to see the way forward.

There is no more important work than what we are doing as a country, as a church and as individuals than the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as we continue to listen, see and know the truth of native people's experiences as they were forced into a transformation at Residential Schools that would take away their identity, their self-knowing, their culture. For those who attended the Commissions so far, they have said how moving and how healing it has been for those who had attended residential schools to find pictures of their schools and their classes which have been shared from church archives, to find out where they were they were small, to see for the first time photos of themselves and what they looked like. Many wept.

In the current Commission, one man shared how a teacher questioned him when as a child he kept going to the washroom to scrub his skin repeatedly. He told her that he was washing himself over and over so that his skin would become white, so that he did not have to be an Indian. It is heart breaking to hear such testimony.

As a white person, born as a settler, into the dominant culture, educated, it has been difficult to hear the stories of our own role and responsibility in our nation's attitudes and actions that have brought such devastation into the lives of our first nations brothers and sisters for hundreds of years. It takes a lot of educating, learning, listening, ruminating and confessing to be able to see clearly into our own hearts, the hearts and minds of our ancestors, to be able to identify and name our collective sin, and to be able to move forward in a new way with fresh eyes, new ways of being community, seeing into the hearts of aboriginal neighbours, leaving behind past assumptions and attitudes. As I have

walked this road of learning about our broken relationship with our First Nations people for over the past 30 years, I know that we/I have been blind, that we need to see for the first time.

“So for the second time they (Pharisees) called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

In what ways are you blind? What are those wounds of sight and insight in your life, about your story that need still healing? How do you seek healing for your blindness? Do you want to be healed? What does it mean for you to seek Jesus for your healing? How do you see God working in the lives of other people? Can you trust God if Jesus or the Spirit does indeed find you and touch your life? How will your attitudes, your health, your actions, your relationships be changed?

The man born blind who gained his sight for the very first time stood before Jesus with questions. It is hard to imagine what he must have been seeing. When Jesus asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir?” Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Even when we are healed in some way – by medicine, by treatments, by good food, good therapy, by caring friends, by rest, by the Holy Spirit – even then it can take time to realize that all of this is the work of faith, the power of our Creator, our loving Father or Mother God reaching out to us, desiring that we might be whole. Sometimes it is hard to see ourselves even as God see us – with love and compassion, as worthy to be healed.

Jesus is the prophet, the Son of God, that sees into our hearts in the same way that God helped Samuel see into the heart of that young Shepherd boy David and saw there a future king, a spiritual leader.

Jesus the Christ, through the Holy Spirit will help us to see beyond the literal to the depths of symbolic meaning, moving us from questioning to trusting, from the darkness of doubt into the joy of believing, from blindness into seeing, from death to life! So let us sing and let us pray that God will touch us with amazing grace so that though blind, we will be enabled to see.

Sing Amazing Grace

