

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, March 2, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

“THOUGH I WAS BLIND, NOW I SEE”

John 9:1-41; sermon text verse 25

A man named Stewart was a member of the church I served in Halifax. He had been blind from birth, and could barely distinguish light from dark. Every Sunday he came to church on the arm of his neighbour. He was 70-ish and lived alone in a white frame house. He received help from many people, but also tried to be as independent as possible. He had retired after years working at the CNIB and knew exactly the number of steps from his home to the bus stop. He carried a white cane and often took a bus downtown to go swimming at the YMCA. His hearing was keen and his sense of feeling was sure. In his back yard a series of clothes lines had been strung so that he could walk safely around the yard hanging on to those lines. After retirement Stewart bought a car, and had it insured so others could drive it. One afternoon every summer I took Stewart for a drive. He always wanted to go in a different direction and take a different route. It really couldn't have made any difference to Stewart, but it gave me the chance to explore various parts of the province. I would keep a running commentary on what I was seeing as we went along. I often wondered what was in Stewart's mind as I spoke about those things. One thing I know is that he loved Tim Horton's, and whenever mentioned that I saw one not far ahead, he would say that we should stop in, which we always did at least once on our trip. Those were very pleasant afternoons.

Now I bring up Stewart, because he reminds us how much a determined blind person is able to do. He also reminds us of what a restrictive disability blindness is. Stewart was not yet able to say words of the man in our story, “Though I was blind, now I see.” (John 9:25)

The Gospel of John, chapter 9 tells us that Jesus saw a man had been blind from birth, a beggar. Jesus spat on the ground, made clay and put it on the man's eyes saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” So he went and came back seeing.” Later when the authorities were questioning him about how this had happened and who had done it, he said, “Whether he is a sinner, I do not know, one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see.” Jesus had opened the man's physical eyes with the power of Almighty God. Jesus had opened the man's spiritual eyes too, the eyes of his heart. For at the end the man not only saw Jesus physically but also who he was. He bowed down and worshipped him, saying, “Lord, I believe.” Both physically and spiritually the man could say, “Though I was blind, now I see.”

Now those words are part of one of our beloved hymns, “Amazing Grace.” “I once was

lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Its author John Newton, a slave trader become Christian, was speaking of how Christ had opened his eyes spiritually.

Now we never discount the powerful work Christ can do and is doing and will still do for the physically blind. But we all have a problem of spiritual blindness. So Christ powerfully opens eyes that are spiritually blind. Christ is opening our spiritual eyes to see spiritual truths. Christ has brought us and is bringing us to the point where we can say, “Though I was blind, now I see.”

First, Christ is opening our eyes to see the truth about suffering.

The disciples said to Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This man’s blindness must have been caused by some sin the man committed in the womb (imagine that!), or by his parents. But Jesus would not let the disciples think of God punishing people in this way. He said, “It’s not that this man or his parents sinned, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him.” For Jesus the issue was not what caused the man’s blindness, but what could be done about it. He saw the man’s suffering as an opportunity for God’s glory to be revealed.

We often grapple with the problem of suffering. We struggle to reconcile a God of love with the agony of the world. This is an old issue. The oldest book in the Bible according to some scholars, the book of Job, is concerned with human suffering. We want to know why. We want an explanation, even for simple things. If I get a winter cold, it must have been because I didn’t wear a hat when I was shovelling snow.

Of course, suffering can be caused by sin such as when a drunk driver kills someone. Living for yourself without thought of the consequences for your neighbour is sin. When powerful people manipulate food and commodity markets for their own gain, and cause people to suffer hunger and want, that’s sin. When someone lies about you and causes you heartache, that’s sin. Sin, our own or that of others, causes suffering.

But not all suffering is directly linked to a person’s sin. We sometimes suffer simply because we live in a fallen world in which 1 in 10,000 children is born blind or with some other defect. And all of us have some defect. Sin will inevitably cause suffering, but not all suffering is directly caused by a person’s sin. Sometimes it happens for no discernable reason.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the fount of all wisdom, could have come with a nicely wrapped up explanation for suffering. That would have saved theologians a lot of time, and saved many trees, too. But Jesus didn’t do that. For him suffering was not so much an

opportunity for discussion, but an opportunity for action. Jesus saw the blind man's suffering and did something about it. Jesus had to do the works of God while there was still time, for night was coming. And by night he meant his own death on the Cross.

You see, here Jesus Christ is opening our spiritual eyes to see the truth about suffering. He helps us to see that suffering is beyond our full understanding and explanation. He helps us to see that suffering is not so much an opportunity for speculation, but for compassionate action. He helps us to see that our God-empowered work is used by God to overcome suffering and help set things right. Think of the work the Christian Blind Mission does in literally giving sight to many blind people in the world.

Then Jesus opens our spiritual eyes to see an even deeper spiritual truth about suffering. Job actually caught a glimpse of this truth at the end of his book. The God of the Bible is not an aloof, uncaring God, but a suffering God, a God who came in Christ to suffer and die to save us from the power of sin and evil and death, a God who suffers with us and for us even now. Jesus opens our eyes to see that God is with us in our suffering, strengthening us and acting to bring good out of suffering for our blessing and for his glory. "Though I was blind, now I see." To know and see the suffering God in Jesus Christ can transform us.

Joni Erickson was a beautiful and athletic young woman who became a quadriplegic after a diving accident. In her bed and wheelchair she became embittered towards the world and towards God. One night Joni's friend Cindy was trying to comfort her and wasn't making much headway. Finally Cindy blurted out, "Joni! Remember Jesus! On the Cross, he was paralysed, too." Those were prophetic words, for as Cindy said them, Joni felt Jesus draw near in a powerful way. Jesus had been where she was, bound and unable to move, and she found that very comforting. She turned a spiritual corner and built a new life of mouth-painting, writing, and public speaking and witnessing to Christ. The works of God were made manifest in her. And it happened because she received strength and purpose from the God who suffered with her and for her, the God who showed by raising up his Son that he will indeed overcome the world's suffering in his time. On resurrection day the first face my friend Stewart will see with his new eyes is that of his Saviour. What a day that will be for him and for us all! And God is giving us a foretaste what is to come through the work he is now doing through Christ's body on earth, the church.

Jesus Christ is opening our spiritual eyes to see spiritual truths. "Though I was blind, now I see." *Christ not only opens our eyes to the truth about suffering; he opens our spiritual eyes to the truth about the church.*

After the blind man had been healed, he wouldn't back down about what had happened. He said this Jesus could only have come from God, which was the very thing the authorities

didn't want to hear. So they cast him out of the synagogue, says John in verse 34.

But in verse 35 there is something wonderful, so typical of Jesus. "Jesus heard that they had cast him out and having found him." You see, Jesus has a special compassion towards the outcast, the misfits, those who don't quite feel at home in the world. Perhaps that's because he himself was despised and rejected by men.

And that's what the living Christ is doing even now, seeking and finding the outcast and offering them a home in him and in his church. And all of us, quite frankly, have been outcast or lonely or rejected at one point or another. But Jesus came and found us and in Him and in His church we found acceptance, friendship and hope. Through Him we received a place in the family and household of God.

Sometimes the life of the church can get messy, because it's made up of all sorts of people. The church has people all over the spectrum in terms of theological understanding and sophistication. Most of us are still discovering and working out what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And Jesus has only begun his work in most of us. He has a long ways to go with me, and probably with you, too. But that's the nature of the church. The church is made up of those who have been sought and found by Jesus. Here we are all sinners saved by grace. Here we eat this bread and drink this cup together. Here there are no distinctions. Having been found by Jesus, and having responded to his love with faith and worship, we will never be outcast again, in this age or in the age to come.

Jesus Christ opens our spiritual eyes to spiritual truths - the truth about suffering and the truth about the church. So by his amazing grace each of us can say "Though I was blind, now I see."

