

What? Are We Blind Too?

The story from John 9 of the man born blind is a rich text. It is dynamic and multi-dimensional. There are many people in this story who encounter Jesus. To understand them better it might be helpful for us to approach this story as if we were making a movie.

I'm not an expert in movie making, but it seems to me that one of the most important tasks is casting. A movie director analyzes the characters. What is their backstory? What has shaped their lives up to this point? What is their point of view? What is their motivation? While preparing to play a given role, an actor asks the same questions and also looks for points of connection between the character's life and their life. As we look at the characters in this story, I invite you to think about points of connection. With which character do you most identify?

The action revolves around a man blind from birth. We're not told what he thinks about himself, but we do know the prevailing opinion is that sin—either his sin or his parents' sin—caused his blindness. He has to beg for food and money to survive. As he is sitting in his usual spot, he hears a group of men discussing the cause of his blindness. He hears one of the men, who he finds out later is Jesus, say that his blindness is not the result of sin. The task of the group is to work so that God's glory can be revealed. We don't know what the man knew about Jesus before this encounter, but when Jesus puts mud on his eyes and tells him to go and wash in a pool, he follows the instructions. As the story progresses, the man's testimony about Jesus also progresses, from stranger – to the one who made him see – to a prophet – to one from God – to the Lord – to the Son of Man – to one to be worshipped. He's amazed when the people around him – including the religious leaders – don't believe his story and don't recognize who Jesus is. He persists in his testimony even when questioned, interrogated, threatened, and expelled. This man – the man born blind who becomes the man who sees – is a model of belief and conversion. He displays intellectual courage and personal fearlessness. How does your story connect with the formerly blind man's story?

The disciples, the neighbors, and the parents are relatively minor characters. Their job is to move the story along until the religious leaders are involved, setting up the final interchange between Jesus and the Pharisees. The disciples appear at the beginning of the story and then disappear from the action. They ask the question that sets the story in motion. It appears that the disciples don't really see the man as a person; they view him as a spiritual object lesson. The disciples view Jesus as a teacher. They want to learn as much from him as they can, but they don't always understand what Jesus is really all about. Can you relate to the disciples?

The neighbors see the man as a marginalized person, a beggar. This view of him is so deeply ingrained in them, that they can't recognize him after he's healed. They are perplexed and uncertain about his identity. After they finally verify that he is indeed the one born blind, they desire to learn about what actually happened. They don't trust what they are hearing and look to their religious leaders for counsel. They ask the man about Jesus, but we don't know what they actually think of Jesus. What do you have in common with the neighbors?

The parents view the man as their beloved son who was born blind and can now see. It seems that they're ready to believe what their son says. They recognize Jesus as a prophet. They know Jesus must have authorization from God to be able to work this miracle. But they're afraid of the consequences – expulsion from the synagogue. They deflect the Pharisee's questions because of their fear. Can you identify with the parents?

And then we come to the Pharisees, the religious leaders. They are theologians who care deeply about the law. They want to worship the true God, honor Moses, and protect their religion. One of their tasks is to look for violations so their religion can remain pure. The Pharisees see the man as one born in sinfulness. They see him as one used by Jesus. Actually, it appears they really don't care that much about the man, they are more interested in Jesus. They see Jesus as a lawbreaker, a source of offense. Some of them raise the possibility that Jesus is from God because he's one who can do miracles, but their voices are quickly silenced.

These religious leaders firmly believe that they are innocent and that they, above all others, can truly see what is happening. They insist they fully understand the theological point Jesus is making and they reject it. They believe true discipleship of Moses is incompatible with belief in Jesus. They stand against Jesus from an informed theological standpoint. Would it be easy for you to play the part of one of the Pharisees?

I confess that when I read this story, I relate most easily to the Pharisees. Sometimes I think they get a “bad rap” from the biblical writers. After all, they’re the ones who are the most knowledgeable about the religion and are the ones trying to get it right. Granted, some of them are very rigid and critical, but there are others who are looking for God to work in new ways. Could these religious leaders be blamed for trying to maintain tradition and supply some structure for belief and practice? Didn’t someone need to establish boundaries and protect God’s people from heretics and crazy ideas?

It appears the problem with the Pharisees is that they worked so hard at protecting the letter of the law that they failed to recognize the spirit behind the law. They failed to see God. They saw Jesus working and hear what Jesus said, but because they thought they knew everything about how God works they refused to see Jesus as part of God’s plan. They chose not to see the presence of God revealed through Jesus. They chose to remain blind to what God was doing.

Consider the question the Pharisees asked Jesus, “What? Are we blind too?” If we’re honest with ourselves and with God, we all must admit that, at least in some respect, the answer to the question is “yes.” Like the disciples, the neighbors, the parents, and the Pharisees in the story from John 9 we fail to see as God sees.

Our lack of vision prevents us from seeing the truth about those around us. It’s easy to overlook or to dismiss people – just a blind man, a child, a teenager, a senior citizen, a conservative, a liberal, a Midwesterners, an east or west coaster, an immigrant, a citizen, a Mennonite, a Catholic, a Muslim – and the list goes on. Once we figure out a label or a box for someone, we may no longer try to see the actual person. We may not see what God sees.

Our lack of vision also prevents us from seeing the truth about Jesus. He is more than a good teacher. He is not simply one prophet among many. His is God incarnate, savior, redeemer, the light of the world.

So how do we make the transition from blindness to seeing? What does it take for our perceptions to change? Sometimes vision clears in one life-changing event as it did for the man born blind. He had an encounter with Jesus and was never the same again. I would imagine that this sort of thing has happened to each one of us, although it may not have been nearly so dramatic. After an encounter with God or after an encounter with another person, our perception shifts and we’re not the same as we were before.

Sometimes vision clears gradually over time and through experience. After repeated encounters with Jesus or repeated encounters with someone, we realize that something has changed and we are seeing differently than we did before.

Education can also help to remove the blinders from our eyes. I’m not saying that we need a certain amount of formal education to see clearly. Sometimes those with academic degrees and religious power know less truth than the simple inquirer. But, by learning about Jesus through study of the Bible and by learning about persons who are different from us through the gathering of information and through listening to their stories, our eyes can be opened to who they really are.

In all cases, the transition from blindness to seeing requires overcoming fear and being open to learning to see as God sees.

The entire world is experiencing a change in perception as a result of the pandemic caused by the corona virus. We are experiencing disruption, uncertainty, and loss. We are being forced to release feelings of superiority, thinking our location and medical achievements make us immune to epidemics like those in our past and in other countries. In this new reality, what are we learning about how God sees the world? How do we truly see the people around us, in central Kansas and also in the areas around our country and around the world hardest hit by this infection? How do we love them and help them? How do we overcome our fears and see as God sees?

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” May the light of Christ shine on and through us. May our eyes and hearts be opened. Amen.