

Who Will Help us See?

A Sermon by **Rev. Laurie McKnight-Walker**

Biblical References: 1 Samuel 16:1–13, Psalm 23, John 9:1–41

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Jean–Dominique Bauby was the editor of the high fashion French magazine called *Elle* when he suffered a debilitating stroke in his mid–40's while enjoying the countryside in his new spiffy convertible with his young son. As a result of the stroke, he suffered what is called “locked-in syndrome” in which he was fully paralyzed except for his left eye which could blink quite easily and his hearing. His speech therapist devised a simple alphabet through which he learned to spell out his wants and needs through a series of blinks. Through the loving support of this therapist, his nurse, his ex-partner, and a devoted scribe, Jean–Dominique, nicknamed Jean–Do, wrote a book in which he described this incredible journey.

Through the creativity of the director Julian Schnabel and a brilliant cinematographer we are invited into the world of Jean–Do to experience what it would be like to only see the world through one eye, to experience the beauty and darkness of life only through your human consciousness and memory. The name of the book and the movie which explores this man's life is called *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, two graphic images that express his feeling of desperate captivity and also the incredible freedom and life given to him through his imagination and memories. Through film we are invited to imagine what this horrible situation would be like and to realize how vital the gift of sight and hearing truly are as windows to the world.

The disciples in John's story see a man born blind sitting by the side of the road begging, as he usually does. They see him, but they don't really see the man behind the cup, only someone who they make into the subject of a theological argument. Why is he blind? Did he sin or did his parents sin, causing this calamity? Whose should be blamed? Bad parenting? Grandparents that defied the law? Judgment from God?

It was common in their day to believe that disabilities were caused by the sin of former generations. They served as deserved punishment. We also can engage in this type of speculation all the time, whether it is with regard to disabilities, or to why people end up in prison, or why people end up trapped into a cycle of poverty or addictions. We want to analyze, to place blame either on the person or their parents, or God. We find it easy to stereotype people by their appearance, the number of tattoos they bear, by their reputation, their skin colour, their sexual orientation, their dress and so on. In many ways we are blind to seeing the full humanity of the person before us, even through we may see, hear, touch, smell perfectly well. Who will help us see?

Jesus does not get hooked by the disciples invitation into intellectual sparring, and instead sees this blind man with the heart of God – he sees in him an opportunity for healing, for being raised to a new life of possibility. This in itself is the miracle – to see each and every person, animal, every tree, fish and ocean as filled with the glory, the potential, the beauty of God. Jesus wastes no time in enabling this man to help himself discover the gift of sight – to see the world, the mud that had been rubbed onto his eyes, the sparkling blue waters of the pool of Siloam, the sky above and the brilliance of the sunlight, his neighbours – to see it all for the very first time!

Did the neighbours celebrate his new found sight? No. It became instead an opportunity for a rationalistic argument about rules, regulations and traditions. The laws said there was to be no working on the Sabbath, even creating something like mud for kneading was forbidden. Law and

order was more important, than anything, even if the new thing, this supposed healing, was being done in the name of the Lord. We'll just see about that, they thought, and so they dragged in the Pharisees, the keepers of the Law to justify their position. The story in John's gospel portrays the Pharisees as religious leaders who were obsessed with rules instead of seeing into the heart of human need.

So instead of seeing the incredible restoration for this individual man – freedom from blindness, freedom from begging, freedom from the shame of being labeled a sinner – they cared more about rules, about traditions, about Sabbath, about law and authority.

Who will help us see our own blindness? Do we ever do this as the church? Are we ever blind in this way? Do we ever want to hold tightly to traditions, even traditions that were supposedly sanctioned by the bible instead of looking and listening for the direction and inspiration of the Holy Spirit? It is often said that when churches become obsessed with rules and the orthodoxy of doctrine, they are in danger of losing their spiritual centre. When you are at church meetings where people become obsessed with the Robert's Rules of Order or the details of the Manual, it can be a marker that the church is in trouble.

In the book *Becoming a Blessed Church* by Graham Standish which I referred to a few weeks ago, he cautions that a church that has become overly rational, controlled by human egos that constantly battle to win over other members to their viewpoint, their plans, their politics, or to prove that the way it has always been done before is the only right way (i.e. tradition), are churches that could experience *respiratory failure* – that is, loss of the divine Spirit which alone is capable of breathing new life into a church or community.

In order to be healthy, churches, like individuals, or families, need to find balance in every dimension of their living &ndash: the mental, the physical, the emotional and especially the spiritual, which undergirds all of the other dimensions of living. "When we aspire to live as the Creator calls us to live, and are inspired by the spirit, the spiritual dimension guides the mental, physical, and relational aspects of our lives, so that they come together in relative consonance. In short, when the spiritual dimension is strong in our lives and churches, it leads us to live healthier, holier, and more whole lives – lives grounded in God and God's love." pg 38

As a congregation, in December you established a visioning committee to revisit the question again as to whether it is God's will to spend large sums of money from endowments and the sale of property in order to further repair this existing building. At our annual meeting today, Sue Reid, the chair of this committee will share with you what has been discerned as the Core Values of this congregation upon which to build our future direction.

Some folk have expressed some confusion and perhaps some anger that this new process was even necessary because the rules of order had been properly followed, and that after a majority vote to spend the money on repairing the building, we shouldn't even be starting a new visioning process.

It is true that the proper rules of order were followed in that process, but what many people within our faith community, including our own presbytery felt, was that the questions – "Is this God's will for our congregation as this point in time? Will this be the best way to use our scarce resources as the United Church of Canada in order to fulfill the ministry that God has been and is calling us to as disciples of Christ?" These questions had not really been fully explored or discerned within our faith community in recent years.

The Pharisee within us can go crazy when we seem to break our own religious rules, so we need to be a little more compassionate with ourselves, and even with those Pharisees and villagers in John's story who just didn't seem to get why Jesus even bothered healing this lost blind man.

Why should he care? Why should they care? What could they possibly do anyway with people who had suffered from birth? Poverty would always be with us.

They did not see their own blindness, nor the humanity of the one born blind. They did not see a human being that needed their compassion and love and that in fact they were being called to reach out to this man set off at the margins of the village. They were blinded by their own traditions, their own rules. The Pharisees and the villagers did not see their own wonderful potential in bringing abundant life to others. In fear perhaps, of doing things in new ways, (like healing on the Sabbath) they clung to their rules, traditions and synagogues. Through Jesus, the church was born. It is such a dilemma – blindness. Who will help us to see?

I believe that Jesus had profound compassion for *both* the man trapped into the sin of poverty by his blindness, and for the Pharisees who were trapped into enslavement to their own laws and institutions. We call this the power of empire, or the power of corporate sin, very alive in the world of today. But the good news is that the Spirit of Christ is still alive and at work liberating us from our enslavements, healing us from our own tragic blindness. God looks upon our hearts, reaching out to us as we languish away, confused about the purpose of our lives, calling us to trust him, to believe that he will lead us to know the way to truly abundant, God inspired living.

Jesus is the light of world, the Holy One who lightens our path to know what is the truth for our lives, for our community of faith, to help us discern what is our work in bringing God's healing to this sinful world. In our hearts we know the way, the path of hope, the way in which abundant life can flow through us, the place where love resides – it is Christ within each one of us – the light, the truth and the way forward. Have faith, believe and follow, for I know that one day you will proclaim with your shining, hope filled lives, “though I was blind, now I see”.

Prayers of the People

Into our darkness we breathe in light, allowing the light to fill us.
As we breathe out we allow the darkness of our fears, our angers, our hurts, to be released.
O Holy One of God, we worship you. Christ before us, Christ above us, Christ below us, Christ within us – light of the world, light of our lives.

Look with compassion upon our blindness, and heal from within of all that causes us to shut down our sight, closing off our hearing, clamping down our hearts, closing our minds.

We breathe in light...
we breathe out darkness and fear.....

Holy Spirit of God, enable us to find healthy balance in our lives – clear minds, capable hands, strong voices, vibrant bodies, relationships of deep caring, faithful spirits.

Grant wisdom and spiritual clarity to our community of faith here at Queen St as we discern how to live out the calling which is ours, to do so prayerfully, to see into the heart of what truly matters and once knowing our path, to live out our vision with joy and confidence.

In sync fully with your Divine will for our lives, we breathe in light and we breathe out light....

With hearts of compassion we remember those people and situations within our lives, our families, our church, our nation, our world:
that need healing.....
clarity of purpose and direction.....
liberation from sin of any kind.....

resolution in the face of conflict...
emotional peace and stability...

We breathe in the light of your peace and truth as we come before you with our own needs and cares....

As we breathe out, may the hope and confidence of your Spirit breathe join ours so that we may live with new resolve, letting our light so shine before others that they may see our good works and join with us in glorifying you O God. Continue to bless us as we pray saying...
Our Father....