

## THE EYES HAVE IT –

A 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, 3/2/08, Year A Sermon, Rev. Daniel Stern, BCUC

God is blind...To outward appearance, to what seems to be, to labels, to judgment by prejudice. God looks to the heart. There, God has eyes wide open.

Are OUR eyes wide shut?

When I look at God's creation every day, the stars, the hills, a blue sky, fresh rain, do I see? When I look at another do I take the time to see? To listen? To appreciate? To marvel? When I look at the people of other countries, when I look at an immigrant, a refugee, do I see God's child? When I look at the cross do I see the courage, the power in the face of God?

God sees beyond all fault and all façade. And God says, "You are beautiful, son of Adam, you are beautiful, daughter of Eve"

May WE be blind as God is blind. May we be sighted as God is sighted.

- Rosemary Broadstock

In ancient times the light of a human being was considered 'living' light, light which derived from the heart and which emerged in the eyes through the process of seeing. The eyes were made of fire, the 'stuff' that caused light, and it was this fire that emanated from the eyes that enabled a person to see. As Aristotle said, "Vision is fire. Sight is from fire just as hearing is from air."

In ancient times, a man born blind was thought to have had to have been a terrible sinner. The very first question was: "Who sinned?" Whose FAULT was it? This STILL seems to be the first question many people ask! Who's FAULT is it that people are gay or disabled, that some get sick or feel sad? Who can we blame for such things? If we blame criminals for their wrong doings, why not blame the poor too for their poverty and the homeless and unemployed for their lack of initiative? It wasn't just the leaders of Jesus' day who blamed the victims; we do it today as well. Maybe we lay the blame on the parents. Perhaps we secretly think it the fault of a doting mom that a boy turns out to be gay; there's gotta be some explanation, right? Maybe anxious or attention-deficit kids were just brought up poorly. Then again, maybe all that ails us is the fault of that alleged old meanie, God almighty!

Well Jesus says "No" to all of these easy, faultfinding explanations. If we are born blind, or by implication, born to endure any particular kind of genetic disadvantage or minority orientation, it is not because anybody sinned, but, in fact, *in order that the work of GOD might be made manifest!* Most of our differences are, in and of themselves, a part of God's tapestry; we are, just as we are, beautiful parts of God's greater work of art, the whole of creation in all its colorful glory. We seem to want to lay blame. Perhaps we should instead be giving credit.

I once read a fascinating essay by a man named Jacques Lusseyran who became blind at the age of 8. In 1941 at the age of 17, Lusseyran became the chief interviewer of prospective members of the French Resistance because he had what his comrades called a (good, strong) 'sense of human beings.' He could 'see' partly by means of their voices, whether some were to be trusted, and whether others were treacherous or weak. His intuitions served him and the French Resistance very well until the day he were betrayed by the one man he had recruited with misgivings – misgivings that Lusseyran had rationalized and suppressed. Because of that one lapse in trusting his own inner light, Lusseyran was

arrested by Gestapo agents and deported to Buchenwald Concentration Camp. He was one of only 30 who survived. The essay I saw of his is entitled "Blindness – A New Seeing of the World" – I borrow the remainder of today's commentary from that remarkable essay.

What thirty-seven years of blindness have taught me—I must admit—is to make great efforts. But they are much more than efforts; they are also discoveries.

Barely ten days after the accident that blinded me, I made the basic discovery. I am still entranced by it. I had completely lost the sight of my eyes; I could not see the light of the world anymore. Yet the light was still there.

It was there. Try to imagine what a surprise that must have been for a boy not yet eight years old. True, I could not see the light outside myself anymore, the light that illuminates objects, is associated with them, and plays on them. All the world around me was convinced that I had lost it forever. But I found it again in another place. I found it in myself and what a miracle!—it was intact.

This "in myself," however, where was that? In my head, in my heart, in my imagination? Don't you feel that such questions are purely intellectual, and worthy only of those adults who have already forgotten the utter simplicity and unquestionable power of true experiences? For me—I was in my eighth year and lived, instead of thinking—the light was there. Its source was not obliterated. I felt it gushing forth every moment and brimming over; I felt how it wanted to spread out over the world. I had only to receive it. It was unavoidable there! It was all there, and I found again its movements and shades, that is its colors, which I had loved so passionately a few weeks before.

The source of light is not in the outer world. The light dwells where life also dwells: within ourselves.

Yet I had to make the effort to find my way between doors, walls, human beings, and trees. As happens to all blind persons, I hurt myself often. But I quickly learned that I knocked against things only when I forgot the light. When I paid constant attention to the light, I ran a much smaller risk.

The second great discovery came almost immediately afterwards. There was only one way to see the inner light, and that was to love.

When I was overcome with sorrow, when I let anger take hold of me, when I envied those who saw, the light immediately decreased. Sometimes it even went out completely. Then I became blind. But this blindness was a state of not loving anymore, of sadness; it was not the loss of one's eyes.

It is often said that seeing brings us closer to things. Seeing certainly permits orientation, the possibility of finding our way in space. But with what part of an object does it acquaint us? It establishes a relationship with the *surface* of things. With the eyes we pass over furniture, trees, people. This moving along, this gliding, is sufficient for us. And here, I believe, lies a great danger. The true nature of things is not revealed by their first appearance. Seeing prefers outer appearance; this is part of its nature.

The danger, therefore, lies in the nature of seeing itself, in its quickness, in its usefulness. This is especially true when we use it for knowing other people. Think of the disastrous errors in our judgments when we base them on the clothes, the hairdo, and the smile of the person we meet. And yet the greatest part of our loving and our hating, as well as the greatest part of our opinions, depend on these clothes, on this smile.

What simply has to be understood is that seeing is not the work of the eyes alone. A blind person knows this. She knows it naturally, not because of an extraordinary gift of intelligence or by her own merit. Deprived of the privilege of the eyes, she measures at the same time her loss and her gain. Most of all, she continues to live and to experience with an irresistible force the wonderful mutual exchange that takes place between the inner and the outer worlds.

Since my childhood I have been impressed with a phenomenon of surprising clarity: The light I saw changed with my inner condition. Partly it depended on my physical condition, for instance fatigue, restfulness, tension, or relaxation. But the true changes depended on the state of my soul.

I had the same experience with space. When I became blind, I found out that an inner space existed. Sadness, hate, or fear not only darkened my universe, but also made it smaller.

Conversely, however, courage, attention, joy, had the immediate effect of opening up and illuminating space. Soon everything existed in me abundantly: a great many objects, pictures, beings. I saw a magnificent landscape before me. I knew that this landscape could be expanded indefinitely; in order to achieve this, my joy had merely to become even greater. At the same time, my physical adroitness increased; I found my way and moved with assurance.

A blind man is disabled; he is infirm; he is excluded from society and not counted a full person. He is accorded compassion, even help, but nearly everyone prefers to hear him complain about, rebel against, and accuse his being different, rather than to hear him describe with assurance the world he carries within himself. The blind often feel very painfully the doubt and lack of faith with which their personal experience is received.

The blind, therefore, either withdraw from the world and lead a life filled with strange habits, thereby widening the gap between themselves and world of the seeing even more, or they direct their efforts toward making others forget their blindness. Rarely, very rarely, do they present themselves as blind, and as wishing to carry out their function as blind persons.

I believe that blindness *has* its own function. It has the tasks of reminding us that the despotism of one sense, sight, is unjust.

It is generally said that the loss of seeing immediately causes the other senses to develop further, that a compensation takes place. This is true. It is true that the blind hear better than the seeing. Sounds make it possible for them to perceive distances and even figures.

The shadow of a tree on the road is not only a visual phenomenon. It is also audible. The oak, the poplar, the nut tree have their own specific levels of sound.

All differences in light have corresponding differences in sound. What I hear, while leaning out of my window under a gray, overcast sky, is sluggish. Sounds have become weak. What I hear when the sun shines has a much more intense vibration.

A blind person hears better, and that is as it should be, because he hears what he does not see. A blind person has a better sense of feeling, of taste, of touch.

But this condition doesn't mean that a new structure is given to the remaining senses of one who is blind. The necessary condition is much simpler; one has to be attentive. A really attentive person could understand everything.

From just this "total attention" the seeing are constantly diverted. So are the blind, but not to the same degree. For them remaining attentive is a practical necessity, and this simple fact constitutes the first of their gifts.

Does a blind person really know what he perceives when, walking along on the sidewalk, he suddenly indicates that he has recognized a gap in the wall or building? Or when he stops a few inches before reaching an obstacle, without even having brushed against it? Can he put into words what he has experienced?

A blind person is in a room; a man enters, sits down, and does not talk. Can the blind person come to know him? Common sense will say no. But I am not sure that common sense is right. The blind person can strain his attention. He can open himself to such an extent that this unmoving person comes closer. By and by, quietly and without moving, he can remove all the inner obstacles that separate him from the other...until he begins to absorb the man's appearance.

Has the blind man developed a higher faculty? With the help of the spirit has he transcended the normal conditions of perception? I believe one should simply say: He touched.

I used a blind person as an example. I could equally well have spoken of a seeing person, because—to repeat—the special merit of blindness is not that it creates a different experience, but that it leads us by necessity toward a heightened experience.

Blindness is my greatest happiness! It gives me a great opportunity: it is the discovery of the constantly present creation. We constantly accuse the conditions of our lives. We call them incidents, accidents, illnesses, duties, infirmities. We wish to force our own conditions on life; this is our real weakness. We forget that God never creates new conditions for us without giving us the strength to meet them. I am grateful that blindness has not allowed me to forget this.

*(Excerpts taken from "Blindness A New Seeing of the World", by Jacques Lusseyran)*

Paul Tillich said, "We are free to look at all things unimpeded. But when we are tired of seeing the world in all its disorder, its facades, its hate and separation, its demonic destruction, its adoration of the false, then let us close our eyes. Then we will see someone who looks at us with eyes of infinite human depth and power. And those eyes say to us "come and see".

Amen.