

Seeing Clearly

A sermon by the Rev. Mark D. Pendleton

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Imagine a young couple in their early twenties who are in love and are on their way to marriage. They have so much going for them: they've dated one another for several years; they seem happy together and in tune with one another socially and emotionally; both of them have graduated from college, and they're on the same page in terms of career goals, balanced in with plans for having a family and raising their children in their home. There's so much promise for them for their future and their life together.

But like many young couples in love they have their share of blind spots. Even though they've had a close and growing friendship, there's so much they don't know about marriage. On a practical level they don't know what it's going to be like to live together, share the same space physically and emotionally, raise a family together, make life and career decisions together, or maintain their sense of balance and equilibrium in the face of trials and challenges that are sure to come. And on a spiritual level they have no real concept of the spiritual and emotional challenges people face in marriage. There are so many things this couple simply doesn't know about marriage, and so many things they don't yet know about how to work through difficult times together. And what they *do* know they may not yet see or understand in living, life-applicable ways.

In addition, to the extent that their relationship and life choices are influenced by false constructs from the world around them, or from their own best, possibly flawed thinking and reasoning, they will tend to be locked into their blindness. What will they do someday down the road when they come to a time when their relationship "isn't working"?

Last week we began our fifth and final spiritual program and series for our church year. The series is titled, *Miracles, Health, and Healing*, and it's built around the fact that the Lord is able to work miracles in our lives. Last week Pete focused on the power the Lord has for accomplishing good things in our lives and in relationships. This week we'll focus on a particular condition that the Lord is able to heal in us, and that is the condition of blindness. The story we've chosen for this is the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida.

There are several things to notice about this story as we get started. (These things help set a context in which the miracle takes place.) The first thing to notice is that the story opens with the words, "Then Jesus came to Bethsaida." We know that the Lord's entire life on earth and all His comings and goings were about helping and healing people who needed His help and

healing; so His coming to Bethsaida reminds us that He comes to each one of us in all of our states of need. When the people brought the blind man to Jesus, what we see and sense in their approach to the Lord is a deep human longing to be helped by Him, mixed with a kind of humility that is able to ask and even beg Him for that help.

The second thing to notice is that Bethsaida was a town on the east side of the Jordan River, not far from the Sea of Galilee, and it was a town that didn't receive the Lord. This is partly indicated by the fact that Jesus led the blind man out of town before healing him.

Third, physical blindness in the Word is a symbol for spiritual blindness, and spiritual blindness has to do with times when we don't know or understand certain principles of truth that can guide us in the affairs of our lives.

One more thing to notice is that the blind man the Lord healed didn't live in Bethsaida. He was *in* the town when the Lord met him, but his home was somewhere outside of the town. This is clear from the fact that after the Lord healed him and sent him away to his house, He told him not to go into the town or tell anyone in town about the miracle.

So if we gather all these factors together, what this story is talking about on a spiritual level is times when things aren't working for us spiritually or for relationships we care about—times when we're in a bad way, or in a tough or even awful place in our lives. We feel like we're stuck, spinning our wheels; we've reached an impasse, a dead end; and we don't see how to get out and move forward. That's what spiritual blindness in the town of Bethsaida is all about.

Examples of this might include the young couple we started with this morning. After the early stages of marriage they start to see that a growing and healthy marriage takes work. *He* snores; *she* talks incessantly. *He's* a penny pincher; *she* spends money without consulting him or the budget. *He's* temperamental, hard, and overly aggressive; *she* can be cold and withdrawn. And when they try to communicate about any of these things, they end up fighting and retreating to their corners.

Another example might be a worker who tends to fritter away time on the job and who isn't "getting it done" for the company he works for. But he doesn't recognize what it is that's negatively impacting his productivity.

Then there are the members of a family who dearly love their dad, but who tend to "enable" him in his alcoholism and in his unwillingness to look for a job to help support the family.

In each of these examples the people involved may very much *want* things to work out and go well; but imagine that in each case they simply lack the knowledge or spiritual tools they need in order for their situation to improve.

Each one of us can probably think of times or situations in our lives or in relationships that are like this—times when we’ve been in a personal “Bethsaida” where things aren’t working very well. We don’t *live* in that place—in the sense of *wanting* to be there—but we’re spiritually blind and we can’t see our way out.

One of the lovely things about this story is the attitude of the people who brought the blind man to Jesus. They believed He could help the man, and they pleaded with Him to do so. This pictures a part of each one of us that longs for things to get better in our situation. We long to know and understand what we can do to help things improve; we long for intelligence and wisdom in life; we believe that the Lord can help us, and so we plead with Him to do so.

Under those circumstances Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And the blind man innocently followed—he allowed himself to be led.

In the New Church we’re told that cities and towns symbolize concepts for life. They are collections of true ideas gathered together into one place to help us go forward in life. But in the context of this story the town of Bethsaida doesn’t carry a positive symbolism, but a negative one. It symbolizes ideas or constructs that are false, unproductive, and unreceptive of the Lord. It symbolizes ideas that keep us stuck where we are in our blindness. Before the Lord can heal our blindness, He first has to lead us away from any false ideas that may be keeping us stuck.

So in the case of the married couple, they won’t be able to see their way clear to resolutions in their relationship as long as each believes (for example) that holding on to resentments is legitimate, and that the *other* person should be the first to make a move toward any resolution. The company worker won’t be able to discover effective ways to “get it done” for his employer as long as he believes it’s okay to fritter away time on the job. And the family members who love their dad won’t be able to be truly supportive of him as long as they believe he can’t help the way he is, or as long as they don’t believe he should be in charge of his own regeneration, or as long as they believe that their own way of “saving” him is better than any other way.

Another one of the lovely things in this story is the blind man’s willingness to follow the Lord’s lead as He took him out of the town. This symbolizes our willingness to part company with any old ideas or constructs that may be keeping us stuck in our blindness.

Once the man was out of the town, Jesus spat on his eyes, put His hands on him, and asked him if he saw anything. Saliva is mostly water, and it also contains a gentle enzyme which causes the first breakdown of foods that enter the mouth. In the Word, water relates to truth that can help our situation. This means that spitting on the man’s eyes has to do with the Lord

introducing simple truths into our minds out of the pages of His Word—truths that have the ability to digest the situation that faces us, make sense of it, and go forward in positive ways.

The Lord's putting His hands on the man is a symbol for power and inspiration to see these simple truths in living ways—in ways that can truly impact our lives and make a difference. Asking the man if he saw anything, reminds us that the Lord wants us to play a part in our own healing. He wants us to take the truths that we know, or the truths He teaches us, and *think* from those principles how we can live a better life.

This is a crucial part of having our spiritual blindness healed. It's all too easy for us in the New Church (or in any faith for that matter) to take the truths that the Lord teaches us, understand them intellectually, and then deposit them in the bank vault of our memory, without really *thinking* from them into the life decisions we have to make.

So, for example, in the case of the young married couple, what effect would it have on their spiritual blindness to know the simple principle of the Golden Rule—"Do unto others as you would have them do to you"—and to really *think* from that principle into their relationship? And what would it be like for the company worker who's frittering away time on the job to really *think* (for example) about the Commandment against stealing in relation to his work habits, or about the Lord's call to be a faithful steward in all that he does? And what effect would it have on a family's spiritual blindness if they really *thought* from the truth that the Lord is our Savior and beside Him there is no Savior; or if they really *thought* from a principle given for the New Church that teaches wise discrimination as part of our charity toward family members and toward people in general?

The truth is that the Lord offers spiritual truths and spiritual constructs that speak to every life situation or relationship question we can experience, and that truth can open our eyes and help open our hearts to see more clearly. The Lord's Word is an incredible resource for doing these things. How can we use it to its fullest potential on a day-to-day basis?

It says that the blind man looked up, which symbolizes us looking up to the Lord, and looking up to higher spiritual principles or values. And when the blind man made that effort, he saw an amazing thing! He saw men, like trees walking (or we could say, trees like men, walking).

Trees are living things with lots of branches, leaves, and in many cases, fruit. They represent our ability to perceive the real truth in anything we learn. It's an ability from which many ideas or useful insights for life can be born. And trees are usually stationary. So to see trees walking would be an amazing thing. What this means is that when the Lord teaches us new truths from His Word and inspires us to think from them into our life situation, all of a sudden we begin to see those truths in a new way—we begin to see how they truly can speak to our lives and help us walk in new ways.

So returning to our examples: the young married couple now thinking from the Golden Rule guards against saying or doing things that would hurt their relationship, and they now listen to each other with significantly greater care and concern. And the company worker now thinking from teachings on theft and good stewardship, uses his time more wisely on the job, and he accomplishes “first things first” in ways that cause his productivity and even job satisfaction to increase dramatically. And the family members who love their dad are able to hold back from enabling him in his derelict life, and to genuinely help and support him in his recovery.

And friends, the experience that is being talked about in this part of the story is a *miracle*. When you have been in an unworkable situation, and you’ve begged the Lord to help you, and you’ve allowed Him to lead you away from false ways of thinking, and you’ve consciously thought *from* truth into your life situation, and now you’re seeing things in a way you hadn’t before—*that* is a miracle.

But there are actually two miracles that the Lord worked for this man—or we might say that there were two parts of the same miracle—and it wasn’t until the Lord put His hands on the man’s eyes a second time and made him look up that his sight was restored and he saw all things clearly.

When the Lord teaches us things that can help us in our spiritual walk, and we consciously put those things to work in our lives, we begin to have *something* of the intelligence and wisdom in life that our hearts have truly long for. But as time goes by, and we practice that truth-based approach to life, over and over again, the Lord performs *another* miracle for us. He makes it so our love for *truth* in life shifts and becomes a love for *goodness*. We start to want real *goodness* to be the thing that happens between ourselves and others around us. And when the Lord causes us to come from that place of goodness in the things we say and do, *then* is when our spiritual sight is really and fully restored. Real goodness in our hearts and lives, and a real dedication to goodness, gives us a kind of spiritual sight, intelligence, and wisdom in life that go well beyond the first healing of our sight that we experience.

But let’s not forget the end of this story. Because after the Lord healed the man of his blindness, He sent him away to his house and said to him, “Neither go into the town nor tell anyone there.” This pictures the Lord giving us a new experience of heaven—a spiritual house in which to dwell—and it’s a reminder to us not to return to old constructs or ways of thinking that have helped keep us stuck in blindness in the first place.

So our final series this year is titled, *Miracles, Health, and Healing*. It’s built around the fact that the Lord can and will work miracles in our lives. The first miracle we’ve talked about is the miracle of healing spiritual blindness, as we willingly come to the Lord, beg Him to help us, follow His lead in our lives, allow Him to take us away from false thinking into new ways of

seeing, and ultimately into an experience of goodness in life—in which case our spiritual sight is fully restored, and we are able to see all things clearly.

“Then Jesus came to Bethsaida...
and they brought a blind man to Him...
and they begged Him to touch him.” Amen.

Readings:

Mark 8:22-26

In the Word, the "blind" whom the Lord restored to sight mean those who are spiritually blind, that is, those who do not know and understand truths. Those who are "blind" also mean gentiles who have no knowledge of the truth of faith because they live outside the Church, but who nevertheless have a longing for it, and who, when they have been taught, accept faith. Those same people are also meant by the blind man whom the Lord healed in Matthew, chapter 8. The blind man in that chapter was "led out of the town" of Bethsaida, because "Bethsaida" symbolized a state of damnation on account of its not receiving the Lord. "Spitting on his eyes" symbolizes reformation by means of truths from the sense of the letter of the Word. The Lord then touching his eyes means that he was illustrated from the Divine. Then the blind man at first "saw trees as men walking," which symbolizes common and obscure perception of truth from the sense of the letter, "trees" symbolizing matters of knowledge, and "to walk" symbolizing to live. "His seeing all clearly," after he was touched by the Lord, means that after instruction and illustration from the Lord he understood truths. (*Apocalypse Explained* 239:20 *Arcana Coelestia* 6990, *Apocalypse Explained* 152:13)

"Eyes" in the Word mean the understanding of truth, and the understanding of truth is intelligence and wisdom; consequently, in reference to the Lord, "eyes" mean Divine wisdom and intelligence proceeding from Him; and what proceeds from Him is communicated to angels and to people who are in love towards Him and from that in faith in Him. Truths interiorly seen and acknowledged constitute intelligence, and these together with goods interiorly perceived and thence seen constitute wisdom. (*Apocalypse Explained* 152:1)

Psalm 119:33-40