

**“Believing Is Seeing”**

There are many barren little towns in South Dakota, as you might well imagine. In one of these towns, named Wessington, there is a small Presbyterian church that did not start out as a church at all. It was the central South Dakota headquarters for...the Ku Klux Klan. In the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were few African Americans within a hundred miles of Wessington, South Dakota, but it was the *philosophy* the Klan espoused that made a chapter viable there. Their sick beliefs applied, of course, to Native Americans, Jews, and to the Chinese people who were out there working on the railroads, *as well as to* the African Americans. Bigotry, it seems, can find a target anywhere. This is as true today as ever, although the language of bigotry, especially among politicians, is more creatively disguised and is expressed in what we now call dog whistles.

But...in Wessington, South Dakota, the Klan eventually faded and dissolved in that part of the country, and their little building stood empty. Then, someone got the idea that it would be fitting for that building – long a symbol of hatred and darkness – to be transformed into a place of brightness and faith, to make it into a *church*! It seemed a curious twist – a real irony – but there was a small group who wanted to form a new congregation, and before long they were organized. With much personal labor and sacrifice they remodeled that old Klan headquarters into a place of divine worship and love.

Now, there had to have been a great moving of the Spirit of God in that very small town, to turn it around from a place where the Ku Klux Klan and their beliefs felt welcome, to a place where the church of Jesus Christ could flourish. The eyes of the people had been truly opened by the Holy Spirit, and that church carries on to this day. In our most recent General Assembly Directory they show a membership of 91, and they are *growing* in membership.

I’m sure that few, if any, of us can imagine what it would be like to be cured of life-long blindness. Certainly, it would be the most joyful moment of a person’s life. It would no doubt be strange, and even frightening, at first. What a

startling world, filled with colors, shapes, and natural wonders! Animals and birds, and the people you have only imagined in your mind before....

But many people who lack one or more of the senses seem to find that their remaining ones are enormously developed to compensate. The deaf person, for example, gets so that he can “hear” through vibrations and touch, and lip-reading. And the blind are often far more alert to the world around them than sighted people, who take it all for granted. Many manufacturing businesses, in fact, seek out blind persons for employment when a sense of touch for smoothness and uniformity is required, and make them the final inspectors of parts or fabrics that have to be exact.

For some handicapped people, their faculties, such as memory, are developed beyond those of the majority of us. When I was a youth pastor in Holden, Missouri, I became acquainted with a very witty blind couple who were Christians. The second time I met with them I was taken aback a bit by the husband’s standard greeting, which was to warmly say, “Gee, it’s so nice to see you again!” He had long since chucked the idea of fumbling for words to bypass the “see you” part. And after talking with them for a while, you were convinced that they did, indeed, “see” you more clearly than most sighted people. They remembered names, events, and details with astonishing accuracy.

In Jesus’ time, however, all people in Palestine and Israel who had any physical or mental impairment had an additional, even greater, cross to bear: they were considered by Jewish theology to have brought this problem or affliction upon themselves. Or, if their challenge had been with them from birth, it was presumed to have been the result of something evil that one or both *parents* had done to offend God. This handicap or illness, then, was God’s *punishment* of them for something.

Even Jesus’ disciples were guilty of being so insensitively judgmental, and they missed the point time and again, even as they stood right by the Master’s side. In today’s Gospel story of the blind man, it was not some of the Pharisees or Scribes, but the disciples themselves, who asked of Jesus, “Who sinned, that this man is blind? Was it something *he* did, or his *parents before* him?” It was a matter-of-fact assumption that his affliction was a judgment of God, a penalty for something. This was the common presumption of virtually *all* misfortune.

The mentally ill were thought to have a demon. Lepers were shunned and cast out and made to have their own pitiful little colonies, not just because leprosy was considered highly contagious, but because everyone figured them to be *the worst sinners in creation* to have been cursed with it at all!

But Jesus nips this one right in the bud when he answers the disciples: “*No one* sinned.” It didn’t happen because anyone sinned. But...in this sickness, or misfortune, God would find an opportunity to show divine power and love in a very tangible way.

Too often *we* still think of *our* suffering – or the suffering of others whom we love – as a judgment of some kind. How often I have heard the complaint, “I thought God said he wouldn’t lay more upon us than we can bear. What have I *done* to deserve *this?!?*”

Now...tell me this: How many of you *really* want an answer to that question, hmm? If you want to completely blow a friendship out of the water, the next time someone rhetorically asks in your presence, “What have I done to deserve this,” *you answer* them. Tell them something like this: “Well, let’s see now...there was that ugly incident at the bar last week...or the time you said you’d like to see a certain so-and-so drop dead. Then again, there are all those red lights you run. And how about the time you made fun of the Salvation Army bell ringer and jammed a wad of chewing gum into his bucket? And didn’t you say recently you’re behind on your church pledge? And, of course I remember well that time when you....”

*Do we really want to hear* such an accounting of our sins...these potential reasons as to why this bad fortune has befallen us? I don’t think so! No, we *do* believe that God’s judgment and justice is *righteous*, but we *don’t* really believe in our heart of hearts that it works *that* way, now do we?

Sometimes, in fact, the *best people* seem to get the *worst treatment* in life. In the summer of 1984, a California apartment house manager, a 29-year-old man, found a maniac on a shooting rampage as he stepped outside the front door of his building. People were running in panic in all directions, and a terrified 3-year-old boy sat paralyzed with fear in the middle of the street. Without hesitation the young man ran and scooped up the boy into his arms,

shielding him with his own body. The gunman fired and hit the apartment manager in his side. The man was able to stumble into the building, still protecting the youngster with his own wounded body.

I'm sorry to say that there is no truly happy ending to this story. Yes, the little one was safe and unharmed, but his hero died on the steps just inside the door. His neighbors and tenants rose up to universally praise him as a reliable, kind, selfless, and friendly person. One woman said, "He's been everyone's best friend here since day one. He never said or did anything bad at all. This is a crying shame, because he was a saint!"

In my personal theology I believe that man received a heavenly reward beyond anything he could ever ask or dream. But in *worldly* terms, if we try to see justice measured by what people *get* versus what they *deserve*, we often come up empty. Maybe that's why we feel so empty at times, because we look for *all* rewards to be given on our *earthly* terms and in earthly ways that we can comprehend and acknowledge. But at such times, if we who claim to be a people of faith believe that God *can* do for us what Jesus *claims* he can do, then we may believe that *no one* is *ultimately* short-changed in this life...for the good *or* for the bad. God always makes things right with us in God's own way and in God's own timing.

In our faith experience, every one of us has some goal, some idea, or some vision of what we want to be or accomplish for God. Maybe its better family relations, greater personal discipline, more service to or through the church, a higher level of faith, being a better steward, or fostering a better self-image so that we can see ourselves as God sees us – with all of the wonderful possibilities God has planted within us. For the practicing Christian, *believing* is the first step toward *seeing* these things come to pass.

But often our thought patterns are far too negative. We can't imagine *really* being able to fulfill our dreams, and so they begin to fade. Even in our *sayings* we betray our lack of faith in God and in ourselves. Have we not been known to say of someone in their time of distress or extreme challenge: "He/she *doesn't have a prayer*"? What kind of observation is that on the lips of a *Christian*, I ask you! What we usually *mean* by that is: "He doesn't have a thing

going in his favor, and even when it gets down to a prayer, which is his last resort, he doesn't have that, either!"

But the fact of the matter is, when you or I "get down" to prayer, we have *not nothing*, but *everything*! Then we are not at the bottom, but on top of, our dilemma, and in control of it. You've heard the old saying, I'm sure: "Any fool can count the seeds in an apple, but only God can count the apples in a seed."

Each of us has many apples in our seed of faith; far more, in fact, than we have ever dreamed. Maybe they are not apparent to you at this time, but they are there. And if you would dare to *believe* it, through faith you will *see* that it is true.

We do not know what will be the final outcome of this current medical epidemic that keeps us *temporarily* isolated from one another. But God is faithfully at work in it, believe me, and is working God's purpose out. Not everything that happens in this world is good; I'm not saying that. Evil exists, and it may be seen with clarity in the manner in which some aspects of this pandemic have been handled. There was evil at the heart of the American Civil War, but God's purpose got worked out, didn't it? There was evil on 9/11, but God wrought much good from that event in the long run. The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 had a chilling effect, to say the least, on the lives of even the most faithful believers, but in the end God's purpose was worked out. The stock market crash of 1929 was a real disaster for our nation, but God's purpose still got worked out. Some of us have already lost 20-25% of our life savings in *this* stock market debacle, in a period of just a few weeks...but God will have the final say, whatever that may be, and will work out the Divine purpose that needs to evolve. Just you wait and see. God is ever faithful. *Believe* it, and you will *see* it. Amen.

### Pastoral Prayer

Shepherd God, we come before you quietly in this time of isolation, aware that this is a rare opportunity to commune with you as individuals or as family units. It is a time for being led beside still waters. Sometimes we feel that our lives are filled with so much noise and turmoil and confusion. So quiet our hearts and our fears now as we bow in the stillness before you.

**Restore our trust and faith, O God, even as you restore our souls. Like the blind man, we come before you seeking the way out of our own personal darkness. We whisper our confessions to you and await forgiveness and restoration. Let your light illumine our eyes that we might be healed of all the blindness that holds us back and limits our lives. Help us, with new vision, to have hope for our future, and enable us to live as children of light even as we lift our prayers to you.**

**We raise up our prayers for our world, especially for those who are being devastated by this viral enemy, unseen but strongly felt. We pray for peace and cooperation among the nations, and healing and justice for all of your children, most especially the infirm and most vulnerable. We pray for the leaders of our nation, that they might receive the sight you would offer them, so that they might govern with wisdom and compassion.**

**Oftentimes, Lord, the issues that we face in our world do not lend themselves to simple solutions. May we do all that *we* can, then, to *be* part of the solution, not taking foolish chances but cooperating with our leaders, with one another, and with you to pursue the best possible outcome. Give us an extra measure of patience as we pass through this valley of darkness, and assure us that you await on the other side when this time of tribulation is past. In the mighty name of Jesus we pray. Amen.**