

“I once was lost, but now am found, ‘twas blind, but now I see.”

“‘Twas blind, but now I see.” These are the words that come from the lips of the blind man who was healed in today’s gospel reading. However, most of you know them best as part of the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” written by John Newton. In his first career John Newton was a sea captain, and a slave trader. During a violent storm he cried out for Christ’s mercy. He was “saved” from the violent storm and his life was transformed. He eventually became a minister of the gospel, and he played an important role in the abolitionist movement in England. It was after that transformational experience that he wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace.”

“‘Twas blind, but now I see.” All of today’s readings connect in some way to blindness and sight. In the First Reading we have the prophet Samuel who is able to see what David’s father, Jesse, **cannot** see – that this youngest son of less lofty stature, forgotten and out in the fields, is the chosen one. Jesse’s youngest son, David, is the one God has chosen to be king of Israel. And Samuel essentially communicates this message, “Humans see only appearances, but God sees the heart.”

“‘Twas blind, but now I see.” In today’s Second Reading from Ephesians, we hear words encouraging us to do our own “shadow work” as

Richard Rohr would say, our own work on self. That is where we look to discover **our** blind spots. We are encouraged to bring our self-deceptions into the light. At the time when Ephesians was written, those who were preparing to be baptized were being encouraged to do what was called a moral inventory and look at their own self. Psychologists will tell you that we must bring our shames and our denials into the light, or they kill us from within. In essence, this is what repentance is about, and it brings not only newness of life, but also a new way of seeing.

“Twas blind, but now I see.” Finally, we come to today’s gospel reading. This passage from John’s gospel is one of the most profound and rich in the whole New Testament. Today we are given this great theater-piece of a Gospel reading about a man born blind. In fact, because this story has so many clear roles, interacting characters, and dramatic lines, some scholars think this story was enacted in sanctuaries in the early church. While there are layers and layers of meaning in this passage, we can only touch upon the surface here this morning. However, I want to share with you some of the major themes so you cannot miss them. And I invite you to take your bulletin home and think about them throughout the week. Here is the way Richard Rohr lists the major themes:

- The “man born blind” is the archetype for all of us at the beginning of life’s journey.

- The moral blame game as to why or who caused human suffering is a waste of time.
- The man does not even ask to be healed. It is just offered and given.
- Religious authorities are often more concerned about control and correct theology than actually healing people. They are presented as narrow and unloving people throughout the story.
- Many people have made their spiritual conclusions before the facts are in front of them. The man is a predefined “sinner” and has no credibility for them.
- Belief in and love of Jesus come after the fact, subsequent to the healing. Perfect faith or motivation is not always a prerequisite for God’s action. Sometimes God does things for God’s own purposes.
- Spirituality is about seeing. Sin is about blindness, or as Gregory of Nyssa once said, “Sin is always a refusal to grow.”
- Finally, the one who knows little, learns much and those who have all their answers already, learn nothing.

“Twas blind, but now I see.” Today’s gospel reading is one in which Jesus invites us into the story, a reading that is truly **our** story, and it speaks to multiple forms of blindness. This reading not only addresses one man’s literal blindness. It also addresses a simplistic understanding of sin that was a common view of the day, yet another form of blindness. When the disciples voice this simplistic understanding of sin by referencing disability or hardship as somehow the result of sin, Jesus **adamantly** disagrees. Also, when the Pharisees assume that knowledge of the law automatically grants righteousness, Jesus counters this thinking by saying that precisely because they deny their sin and **claim** to “see,” **they** are in fact sinning and they are the blind ones. Jesus says this because “sin” at its

most basic level is **not** recognizing Jesus as God's messiah, the person through whom God is at work to save the world.

Blindness is **not** about the quality of our vision or the condition of our eyes. It is **not** about the darkness around us but, rather the darkness within us. How we see others, what we see in the world, the way we see life, is always less about the objects of our seeing and **more** about ourselves. Too often, we do not see God, people, things, or circumstances as they are but as WE are. Until our eyes are opened by Christ, our seeing is really just a projection of ourselves onto the world. **What** we see and **how** we see manifest and make known **our inner world**. They describe and point to the fears, attachments, and beliefs within us.

If we wish to see God, life, and others as they really are then we must attend to what is going on within us. True seeing begins in the **heart**, not the eyes. We must begin to acknowledge the fears, attachments, and beliefs that live within us and how they have impaired **our** vision.

To follow Jesus is to see differently. Sometimes, to follow Jesus is to be brought into a messy situation, maybe even a crisis. But, in the mess, God is doing a new thing. And, to have a conversation with Jesus and follow him is to be opened to newness. Sometimes, this newness means discovering we are blinded when we **think** we see perfectly. Sometimes,

this newness means to be given new insight, a new way of thinking and being. This blind man was made new, and he was given new sight, a new life, and a new chance.

Theologian, Nadia Bolz Weber, writes, “New is often messy. New looks like recovering alcoholics. New looks like reconciliation between family members who don’t actually deserve it. New looks like every time I manage to admit I was wrong and every time I manage to not mention when I’m right. New looks like a very fresh start and every act of forgiveness. New is the thing we never saw coming – never even hoped for – like our blind guy in this story. But new ends up being what I needed all along.” **And, by the way, such newness is also what we call grace, it is what we call love.** Bolz-Weber continues by saying, “God simply keeps reaching down...reaching down into the dirt of your humanity and resurrecting you from the graves you dig for yourself through your violence, your lies, your selfishness, your arrogance, and your addictions. And God keeps loving you back to life over and over....There are times when faith feels like a friendship with God. But there are other times when it feels....I don’t know....more vacant. Yet none of that matters in the end. How you feel about Jesus or how close you feel to God is meaningless next to how

God acts upon you. How God indeed enters into your messy life and loves you **through** it, maybe whether you want God's help or not."

Yes, maybe whether you want God's help or not. In today's story, one of the most remarkable things is the fact that the blind man didn't seek out Jesus or ask for his help. Yet, he was healed and made whole in the end. And the powerful, life-giving truth of the gospel is that our suffering, our grief, and even our sin, will not have the last word.

This story is truly our story. The inner darkness of our fears, our attachments, and beliefs is what keeps us from seeing. They cover our eyes like the mud on the eyes of the man born blind. In placing mud on the blind man's eyes, Jesus is holding before him the reality of his blindness. He wears thick black lenses of fear, attachments, and beliefs. We all do. Those who know this are sent to wash in the pool, to be re-created, to be made new in the waters of our baptism, and to see with new eyes. And, as the cool and refreshing waters of life wash over us – those baptismal waters in which we daily live – our eyes and our hearts are opened to behold the living Christ, standing before us as the chains of death and hell lay broken at his feet. There is then no other response than to raise our voice and cry out at last, "Twas blind, but now I see! Lord! I believe!"