

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, March 26, 2017)

Text: John 9:1-41 (*The Voice*) *This scripture was enacted by a group of players for this Sunday's service. Below is the original text taken from The Voice.*

While walking along the road, Jesus saw a man who was blind since his birth.

Disciples: Teacher, who sinned? *Who is responsible for this man's blindness?* Did he commit sins that merited this punishment? If not his sins, is it the sins of his parents?

Jesus: Neither. His blindness cannot be *explained or* traced to any particular person's sins. He is blind so the deeds of God may be put on display. While it is daytime, we must do the works of the One who sent Me. But when the *sun sets and* night falls, this work is impossible. Whenever I am in the world, I am the Light of the world.

After He said these things, He spat on the ground and mixed saliva and dirt to form mud, which He smeared across the blind man's eyes.

Jesus (*to the blind man*): Go, wash yourself in the pool of Siloam.

Siloam means "sent," *and its name reminded us that his healing was sent by God.* The man went, washed, and returned to Jesus, his eyes now alive with sight. Then neighbors and others who knew him were confused to see a man so closely resembling the blind beggar running about.

Townspople: Isn't this the man we see *every day* sitting and begging *in the streets*?

Others: This is the same man.

Still Others: This cannot be him. But this fellow bears an uncanny resemblance to the blind man.

Formerly Blind Man: I am the same man. *It's me!*

Townspople: How have your *lifeless* eyes been opened?

Formerly Blind Man: A man named Jesus *approached me and* made mud from the ground and applied it to my eyes. He then said to me, "Go, wash yourself in the pool of Siloam." I went and washed, and suddenly I could see.

Townspople: Where is this man *who healed you*?

Formerly Blind Man: I don't know.

The townspeople brought the formerly blind beggar to appear before the Pharisees *the same day Jesus healed him*, which happened to be on the Sabbath Day. The Pharisees began questioning him, looking for some explanation for how he could now see.

Formerly Blind Man: He smeared mud on my eyes, and I washed; now I see.

Some Pharisees: God can't possibly be behind this man because He is breaking the rules of the Sabbath.

Other Pharisees: How can such a lawbreaking scoundrel do something like this?

The Pharisees were at odds with one another about Jesus and could not agree *whether His power came from God or the devil*.

Pharisees *(to the formerly blind man)*: What do you say about this man, about the fact He opened your eyes so you could see?

Formerly Blind Man: *I have no doubt*—this man is a prophet.

Some of the Jews suspected the whole situation was a charade, that this man was never blind. So they summoned the man's parents to testify about his condition.

Pharisees: Is this man your son? Do you testify that he has been blind from birth? How therefore does he now see?

Parents: We can tell you this much: he is our son, and he was born blind. But his new sight is a complete mystery to us! We do not know the man who opened his eyes. Why don't you ask our son? He is old enough to speak for himself.

The man's parents were a bit evasive because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. It had been rumored that anyone who spoke of Jesus as the Anointed One would be expelled from the synagogue. So they deferred the thorny question to their son, and the Pharisees called on him a second time.

Pharisees: Give God the credit. *He's the One who healed you*. All glory belongs to God. We are persuaded this man you speak of is a sinner *who defies God*.

Formerly Blind Man: If this man is a sinner, I don't know. *I am not qualified to say*. I only know one thing: I was blind, and now I see.

Pharisees: What did He do to you? How did He give you sight?

Formerly Blind Man: *Listen*, I've already answered all these questions, and you don't like my answers. Do you really need me to say it all over again? Are you thinking about joining up with Him and becoming His followers?

Pharisees (*berating him*): You're one of His followers, but we follow Moses. We have confidence that God spoke to Moses, but this man *you speak of is a mystery*; we don't even know where He comes from.

Formerly Blind Man: Isn't it ironic that you, *our religious leaders*, don't even know where He comes from; yet He gave me sight! We know that God does not listen to sinners, but He does respond and work through those who worship Him and do His will. No one has ever heard of someone opening the eyes of any person blind from birth. This man must come from God; otherwise, this miracle would not be possible. *Only God can do such things*.

Pharisees: You were born under a cloud of sin. How can you, *of all people*, lecture us?

The religious leaders banished him from their presence. Jesus heard what had happened and sought out the man.

Jesus: Do you believe in the Son of Man?

Formerly Blind Man: I want to believe, Lord. Who is He?

Jesus: You have seen His face *with your new eyes*, and you are talking to Him now.

Formerly Blind Man: Lord, I do believe.

The man bowed low to worship Jesus.

Jesus: I have entered this world to announce a verdict *that changes everything*. Now those without sight may begin to see, and those who see may become blind.

Some Pharisees (*who overheard Jesus*): Surely we are not blind, are we?

Jesus: If you were blind, you would be without sin. But because you claim you can see, your sin is ever present.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“Defined by Light”**

What defines who you are? Have you ever thought about that? Are you defined by what you do, who you are, how you look or perhaps who you believe you belong to? Are you beyond definition, found in no dictionary and certainly not willing to be broken down, analyzed or labeled?

In our story for today, a fascinating one from the Gospel of John, a writer who loves to go into great detail, we meet a man defined for all time by his seeming limitation, illness, challenge or

however you would define blindness. In today's story as we heard it brought so dramatically to life, The Voice describes our central character (other than Jesus, who is always at the center) as "blind since his birth," and it would appear that everyone who knows this man or encounters him takes that aspect of what they SEE and defines him as such – the blind man.

It's interesting to note right at the outset how much of what we see is reflective of who we are and many times says more about the observer than the observed. For here we have the disciples immediately needing to assign blame and peppering Jesus with how such blindness came to be – from the man's sins or, barring that, from the sins of his parents. And as much as we'd like to think this kind of thinking is not part of who we are today, I know that such a belief system is very much alive and active in many living in this 21st century. How damaging such beliefs and how crippling such questions can be to those challenged by physical and mental illnesses.

But Jesus, our way shower, will have none of it, of course. "Neither," he replies immediately. He rather sees the man's blindness as a way of bringing to light the goodness of God and the wonders of how God works. Rather than define the man in the way everyone else does, Jesus shines the light of love upon him and, in a poetic and symbolic gesture of God's healing water and healing earth spits on the ground to make a paste that will remove the darkness and bring the light not only to the one defined as blind but to those blind to what God's kin-dom is really about – the disciples, the Pharisees, the townspeople and all of us who encounter this story across the centuries. Even Jesus' command to the man to wash himself in the pool of Siloam carries great meaning and symbolism as Siloam means sent and, as John tells us, reminds us that the healing was sent by God.

I think more harm has been done in the way we define, label and identify ourselves and others than by almost anything else we do in these lives of ours. Seeking to differentiate we from them, I from you or those people from us people, we erect barriers, higher even than 30 foot impenetrable walls if you will, that prevent the light of God to shine through and bring the healing and connection so vital to living in peace with one another and allowing our brightest and best qualities to shine. Judging those who are different from us and therefore sinful or wrong in some way, prevents us from being able to see God's light shining forth from them and reflecting the God light shining out of us. This leads us into a stalemate of dreadful proportions that takes us lower and lower and continues to separate us into intolerant groups of small-minded people whose better angels never see the light and have no chance of scaling the increasingly higher and thicker walls we erect.

When I was struggling so mightily with coming out as a gay man in my late teens and early twenties, the one thing that consumed me more than any other was knowing that, by coming out, I would no longer be known as "Don the actor, or "Don the Christian" or "Don the music man," but I would always be known first and foremost as "that gay guy" – no name required.

In the strict conservative society I was growing up in I knew that coming out as gay would mean it would be the very definition of who I was and that every glance, every whisper, every raised eyebrow would communicate "oh, there's that gay guy" more than anything else about who I was, what I believed or what I may have accomplished in my life.

It was only when I was able to define and SEE myself as God's pure and unblemished child and accepted once and for all that I was made in the image of God that I could stop worrying about how anybody else defined me and finally come out. I realized that only the One who created me could define me, and that, as a good old country song puts it, "it is none of my business what you think about me!"

How many times a day do we slap a definition on someone, maybe even ourselves, and use that definition to separate us from our Creator and from working towards reconciliation, understanding and forgiveness? How many times do we think how much more comfortable we'd be if we just didn't have to deal with that person or that group or that less than desirable aspect of ourselves? How many times do we climb up into that judge's chair and decide that we know better than God about who is in

and who is out and start separating the sheep from the goats 'cause that's just how righteous we are in our own small, diminishingly defined worlds?

"Sometimes conversion, belief and sharing our story provoke judgment, rejection, and condemnation from those around us," wrote Rev. Kate Matthews at ucc.org this week. "It's a lonely place to be, and John's way of telling this story must have spoken powerfully to the people in that situation, reassuring them that they were not alone: they now belonged to a community that shared the same faith, and, ultimately, like the man in this story, they would encounter Jesus on their way.

"What are the standards we use to judge what we experience, whether it's a person, a building, a mission or ministry, or whether it's an event, such as a healing or transformation, or even a disaster?" she asks later in her essay. "What are the core truths we depend on, as the man cured of physical blindness depended on when he reasoned that Jesus must be "of God," since he was able to do "something that had never before happened"? And yet even that reasoning was not enough. He needed to encounter Jesus, to understand what was happening.

"When--and how--[do you] take time to encounter Jesus Christ and to experience the truth that transforms your life, to follow in a new path that you previously could not imagine?" she asks.

"In [our reading] this week, we're challenged to see the world like God sees it," writes the Rev. Dan Clendenin in his article, "Vision Correction." "To see things like God does, rather than the way the world does, is an essential part of being God's people in the world... [But] to see like God does requires radical vision correction, for God doesn't look at the world like we do..."

"One of the most dangerous spiritual places we can live is in the deluded notion that we are fully-sighted, spiritually-speaking," he asserts. "Conversely, the healthiest place to live is not only to acknowledge our spiritual blindness, but also to recognize that as an acceptable place to live. In acknowledging our blindness, we live in the light; by believing that we see fully and rightly, we stumble in the darkness... Healthy people befriend their blindness and make their peace with it. Spiritually-sighted people recognize that acknowledging their blindness is an act of liberation not a confession of bondage. The journey toward the light begins when we acknowledge our darkness."

As we continue down this Lenten path, slowly making our way to the cross and the place where the ultimate surrender is exemplified for us, let us not be afraid to look deeply into who we are and define ourselves as God's children of light. Let us acknowledge that we are accompanied through this valley of the shadow of death, and be willing to expose our most wounded and dark places to the light of the One who has walked this path before us and continues to walk it with us still.

BEGINNING TO SEE by Andrew King

Judging, condemning and affixing blame –
things we like to do,
but not why Christ came.
"Who sinned – this man? Parents?"
disciples ask,
as if pinning blame is the crucial task.
But the crucial task, according to Christ,
is to heal the afflicted, to bring sight
to blind eyes and give new strength
to the weak,
new beginnings to life where only the bleak
shadows of death once had been –
maybe spend
less time deciding who's at fault and end

debates about sin. Better to worry,
Jesus says, about doing good: hurry
to help while it's day, for that is God's work
and God's way.

So he takes clay, the dirt from which we are made, spits, makes mud, applies
the raw mixture to the born-blind man's eyes,
has him wash. And the beggar is made new:

he sees! Imagine the dazzle of hue
and shape and texture; miraculous song
of color, of movement; the faces long
guessed-at now plain –
the world reborn for him.

Some things still take time
to become less dim
(like the blindness of prejudice in those
who knew him)

but see how the beggar grows
in boldness and faith: an inspiration
to all who know that the new creation
is often grown into a bit at a time.

Jesus brings us new sight:
new heart and mind,
but sometimes it's slowly we understand,
and don't always have all answers at hand.

Yet this man responds to Christ
when he calls,
which is what God seeks from us,
most of all.

And I am blind clay, unable to see
until you, O Lord, re-mud, remake me.

Amen.