

The Gifts of Jesus: (In)Sight

a sermon

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John 9

At the church in Texas I attended for several years, I got to know Andy. Andy would often be the reader, which means that, at the right time during the worship service, right before the pastor's sermon, he would go to the pulpit and read the Bible passage.

Andy was pretty good at it, having no trouble with the strange names that would sometimes come up in these Bible readings. And it was clear that Andy enjoyed this bit of church participation and leadership. Because as he introduced the scripture reading he would sometimes say, with enthusiasm, "This is one of my favorite passages!"

Actually, he would say this a lot, so often in fact that we all soon began to realize that Andy's list of favorite Bible passages was almost long as the Bible itself.

Well, this part of the Gospel of John is one of *my* favorite passages in the Bible. Perhaps my list is a bit long, too, although probably not as long as Andy's. Even so, this chapter from the Gospel of John has an important place on my list. It's one of those parts of the Bible that continues to delight and challenge me. And there's so much there, to delight *and* to challenge, things that make me think, and wonder, and wince — so much there that I will never reach the end of what this one chapter of the Bible can teach me.

Yeah, there's a lot in there. So I want to focus on one thing, and for a little bit talk about just that.



That one thing is found in the irony made clearer and clearer as this chapter goes along, with the blind made able to see and the seeing shown to be, in a way, blind. That's the big contrast in this scene: the man who was blind ended up seeing far more than the people who had never been blind, who in the end showed themselves to be, spiritually speaking, lacking in sight.

Jesus gave the man his sight. He previously could not see, not at all, never before. And then, he could see. Jesus gave him the gift of physical sight.

So astonishing was this gift that a good number of people didn't want to believe it. Maybe it wasn't him. Was it? Maybe he hadn't really been blind. Had he?

Now here's something tough. His being able to see was great. But it was not entirely a happy thing. Because with physical sight came *in-sight*. He could now see

beauty *and* ugliness,
joy *and* sorrow,
not only the good in others but also their shame,
not only the surface faith but also the unbelief lying just out of sight.

The man could see, because he had received the gift of sight from Jesus. That gift was not only physical; it was also, he soon came to understand, spiritual. The man was not only given sight. He was given *insight*. He was able to *see* what was around him — people, trees, buildings, distant hills — but he was also able to *perceive*:

their meaning,
their relationships to him and to each other,
the truths they inhabit and the falsehoods they may be hiding,
desperately hiding,
failing to hide.

The man (I wish we were given his name!) knew it was Jesus who healed him. Jesus made mud, put it on the man's eyes, then told him what to do next, to go and wash — whether it was for his healing to be completed, or for it to be known, I'm not entirely sure. Maybe a little bit of both.

But the thing is, even though he knew it was Jesus who had healed him, he didn't know what Jesus looked like, because when Jesus had put mud on his eyes and then told him to go and wash, the man couldn't yet see, so at that point he had never actually *seen* Jesus; and then when he was first able to see, Jesus was somewhere else than where he was.

And then, when Jesus and the man reunite, Jesus reveals himself to the man,

tells him "I am he,"
opens up his eyes yet again,
gives him the eyes of *faith*,
gives him not only sight but in-sight,

so that the man born blind would see and know Jesus as his sight-giver, who brings

light to what was dark,
clarity to what was murky,
depth to what was shallow,
honesty to what was false,
healing to what was wounded,
and forgiveness to what had failed.



Life, true life, life before God, is very much about *seeing*.

I don't mean so much physical sight. Some people do not have that ability. They were either born blind or became that way, from accident or disease.

Instead, I'm talking about perceiving. I'm talking about insight. I have in mind the ability to see — as they really are — yourself, the world, and God, and to see the relationship and the distance of one to the other.

When you first begin to have it, when you first receive Christ's gift of in-sight, such seeing is a bit disorienting. For we're not used to seeing things this way, that is, the way they really are.

We're used to seeing ourselves in the best light possible.

Or maybe, for some us, in the worst light possible.

Both of these are just different ways of putting ourselves in the spotlight. We cherish the private conceit that the greatest story ever told is, without a doubt, "The Story of Me."

But when you have your eyes opened by the grace of Christ, your perception changes. All your traits are qualified and relativized. Now,

you see God as holy; you see yourself as not so holy.

You see God as strong; you see yourself as weak.

You see God as forgiving, and yourself as very much in need of forgiveness.

You see God as *God*, and yourself as decidedly *not* God.

But not only that, you see all your traits lifted up and placed into a realm of blessing and joy you could never have found on your own.

You begin to see

your abilities as gifts from God,

your weaknesses — yes, your *weaknesses* — as opportunities for blessing and growth,

your strengths as both joys and temptations.

You begin to see, as teacher and retreat director Suzanne Stabile might say, that the best part of you is often the worst part of you, the worst part of you is sometimes the best part of you, and that God loves *all* of you.¹

When you have your eyes opened by Jesus, everything else, you begin to see, is a kind of blindness. Everything else, every other way of seeing and perceiving, is, apart from this one, little more than a walking around with your eyes shut tight.

To know God truly is to see yourself for who you are:

as rich *and* poor,

as gifted *and* flawed,

as saint *and* sinner,

as arrived *and* on the way.

Even when you come to that place where you really have progressed, where you truly feel for real the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, even then — or should I say, *especially* then — you will see how dependent on Jesus you truly are.

But this is all about much more than your own inner life. It's more than what you feel and experience on the inside. It's more than what you see about yourself.

For when Jesus gives you his gift of your sight and your insight,

you're able to see the pain that lies beneath another's smile;

you're able to perceive the fear that whispers underneath another's bravado;

you can see the cruelty that animates the pretend kindness,

and you can see the warmth that hides behind the cold mask of self-protection.

¹This, or something close to it, is said often by Suzanne Stabile, co-author of the book and co-host of the podcase, with Ian Morgan Cron, *The Road Back to You* (Book: InterVarsity Press, 2016; Website & podcasts: <https://www.theroadbacktoyou.com/>).

With the gift you've been given by Jesus, you yearn to make plain what is obscure, and visible what is hidden.

And, with his help, you can.

It's not easy. To have your sight restored by Jesus is to be set walking on a path that may be lonely, painful, even dangerous. Others, convinced they see just fine, will not respond well to those who live with restored sight. To them, the spiritually sighted are a threat. Because those who truly see are the walking, talking proof that those who claim to see are blind ... and they can't stand that.

But you do not walk the path alone. Jesus knows the way. He, who gave you sight and in-sight, sees all that lies behind and ahead. And he will guide you, so that you may be with him as he brings

light to what was dark,
clarity to what was murky,
depth to what was shallow,
honesty to what was false,
healing to what was wounded,
and forgiveness to what had failed,

all for his glory, for him who gives us his gift of sight and in-sight, Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be honor and praise forever and ever, amen.