

Last week I had my semi-annual checkup at the ophthalmologist. I had my eyes dilated and got sent home with surround sunglasses. As it was a bright, sunny day, I was grateful for the shades! Throughout the rest of the day, though, I had trouble seeing. I couldn't read my texts. I had to enlarge the print on my laptop. I struggled to see the tiny dates on my calendar. Ironically, as I went to the eye doctor to take care of my eyes, I found that my eyes weren't working, at least not as well as I am accustomed to having them work.

In today's gospel reading, we meet a man whose eyes don't work at all, until Jesus spreads mud made of spittle on those eyes—and tells him to go and wash them in the pool of Siloam. The man, blind from birth, went as Jesus said, and washed, and came back able to see. Whether blindness is congenital or the result of an accident or an infection or a degenerative disease, the person who is blind is unable to see. But there are many other definitions of blindness that have nothing to do with physical sight.

For example, we can describe a person who is "unwilling or unable to perceive or understand" or whose choice is "absolute and unquestioning, not based on reason or evidence" as "blind," such as: *She had blind faith in his fidelity. They were blind to their children's faults. He was blind to all arguments.* Or we can indicate that someone's behavior is "lacking in reason or purpose or control" or "lacking in consciousness or awareness," by noting his *blind tenacity*; or her *blind stupor*. Or we can use "blind" to describe how a particular action is performed, "without the benefit of background information that might prejudice the outcome or result," as in: *The professor's psychology students did a blind study in the lab.* Or "performed without preparation, experience, or knowledge," as in: *She made a blind stab at answering the question.* Or "performed by instruments and without the use of sight," as in: *The plane was equipped for blind navigation.*

There are still other meanings for the word "blind." We hang blinds on windows so that we can't see out—or others can't see in—or the light can't get through. We construct a duck blind or a deer blind for hunting or photography. We speak of being "blinded" by sunlight on snow or oncoming headlights at night. Or by prejudice or racism or sexism or homophobia.

What is common in all these meanings is a barrier—in blindness, there is a barrier to seeing or knowing or believing something. There's a barrier, for example, between two people who have fallen in love, who are blind to one another's faults. One is prevented from seeing the other's alcoholism or admitting that the other can't manage money. In a blind scientific experiment, there's an intentional barrier; information that might lead to bias is concealed from the participants. There's a barrier between a man who has been blinded by chauvinism and his ability to encourage his daughters to excel. To be blind is to be unable to see, either physically, with your eyes, or figuratively, with your mind or your heart.

Are there times when you are unable to see? When you are blind? Do you encounter barriers to seeing the truth? To knowing your strengths and your weaknesses? To believing that you can accomplish what you set out to do? To believing that God loves you? When do you experience blindness? When can't you see what you need to see?

The man in today's gospel story is physically blind, blind from birth. For him, physical blindness erects a barrier—to mobility, to connection with other people, to employment—until Jesus sees him, spits on the ground, makes mud with the saliva, spreads it on his eyes, and tells him to go and wash. He goes, and he comes back, seeing. But the man is still blind. He still can't see who Jesus is.

The man journeys from spiritual blindness toward spiritual insight, even after Jesus heals him physically. Initially, when his neighbors ask how he was healed, he tells them of the actions of "the man called Jesus." When the Pharisees ask him, "What do you say of Jesus?" he answers, with growing faith, "He is a prophet." When they interrogate him a second time, accusing Jesus of being a sinner since he healed the man on the Sabbath, he says, with a bit more boldness, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." Next, the man confesses that he is a disciple of Jesus. Then, when the Pharisees disparage Jesus because they don't know where he comes from, the man says, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." When Jesus finds him later and asks if he believes in the Son of Man, he answers, longing to believe, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Finally, when Jesus reveals himself, the man answers, in confident faith, "Lord, I believe." After receiving his physical sight, the man moves from spiritual blindness to spiritual insight.

Do you ever experience spiritual blindness? Do you pay attention when God is tugging on your heart, or do you close your eyes when you notice God drawing near? Do you erect barriers to seeing God's work in your life? Do you see and feel God's grace and mercy and love pulsing in your heart? Or do you ignore it or push it away? Are you blind to God?

Are you blind to others? Do you close your eyes to those in need, either at home or in your neighborhood or in Newburgh or far away? Is there a barrier between you and those who look, act, speak, or dress differently than you do? Are you blind to the needs of the poor, in our own community or far away? Are you blind to your spouse who wants your time more than the money you earn with your 70 hour a week job? To your children who cry out for your attention? To your neighbor who needs you? Are you blind to others?

Are you blind to yourself? Is there something in your life that prevents you from seeing yourself as you are—exactly as you are, beauty spots and warts alike? As competent, perhaps, or lonely or playful or sorrowful or immensely talented or brilliant or guilty or joyful? Do you close your eyes to seeing yourself as God sees you—as beautiful, beloved, baptized? Do you encounter barriers in recognizing your own needs—or in asking for them to be met? Is it hard for you to ask someone else for help—or to receive help when it is offered? Do you resist hearing God say, "You are my Beloved"? Are you blind to yourself—or your own needs?

Are you blind to creation? Do you see God's hand in earth and sky and sea, in birdsong and dog kiss, in budding leaf and blossoming flower? Or do you close your eyes to the wonder that God offers you, every day, in every moment? Do you care for the earth by recycling household waste or installing solar panels or driving hybrid? Or do you turn away from stewardship of creation because you can't imagine what difference one person's actions will make or find that it's just too much work to practice environmental justice? Are you blind to creation? Are you blind to yourself, to others, to God?

Fanny Crosby, born in 1820 near Brewster, NY, experienced both physical and spiritual blindness. Author of over 5,000 hymns, including "Blessed Assurance" and "Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross," she often struggled with her faith. Like the man born blind in today's gospel lesson, she grew only gradually into her understanding of God's love. Sometimes she did not feel the "true love of God in her heart." Weary and depressed during a cholera epidemic at the New York Institution for the Blind, where she taught, she experienced a spiritual crisis and longed for assurance of her salvation. On November 20, 1850, she knelt at the altar at the Chelsea Methodist Episcopal Church in Manhattan and prayed for spiritual victory. She later testified: "My very soul was flooded with celestial light. I sprang to my feet, shouting 'Hallelujah!' But, in spite of her flash of spiritual insight, Crosby did not experience a "sudden or dramatic change in [her] way of life," but continued to endure times of spiritual blindness. She later wrote, "My growth in grace was very slow, from the beginning."

For Crosby, in the end, physical blindness was preferable to spiritual blindness. Growing to thank God for her blindness, she wrote: "It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank him for the dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me." For Fanny Crosby, physical blindness opened her mind and heart to spiritual insight.

From what spiritual blindness do you need to be delivered, dear friend? For what spiritual insight do you long? How do your eyes—or your mind—or your heart—need to be opened? Jesus knows your blindness, even if you don't. He sees you, as you are, in strength and in weakness, in triumph and in struggle. He sees your resilience or your worry or your illness or your creativity or your selfishness or your confidence or your grief or your anger or your fear, and he loves you as you are. He spits on the ground and makes mud and spreads it on your eyes—or your mind—or your heart—and then he sends you to wash. Not in the pool of Siloam but in the font of Baptism. He sends you to feel again the splash of water, to hear again the word of forgiveness, to see again, to be restored—with sight and with insight. AMEN