

“That Which Blinds Us”

A Lent 4 Sermon

John 9:1-41

Sunday, March 2, 2008

by Dr. Frank Trotter

Mark Baker, a clinical psychologist and director of a counseling center here in Pasadena, tells a story about a young man named Tommy who was a ward of the state and living at a home for boys. In describing the young man, Dr. Baker says, “Even though he was only seventeen, he had some definite ideas about his life. He trusted no one and didn’t expect anything from anyone. He would steal if he could get away with it, lie straight to your face, and never display a hint of remorse when he got caught. Tommy thought he was pretty smart, and he was certain that everyone else was stupid. There was no convincing Tommy that his perspective was skewed... Tommy was a hard guy to help. He wasn’t interested in help. He was absolutely certain he was right in his assessment of people and had no interest in anybody’s ideas to the contrary...”¹

In Dr. Baker’s new book entitled *Jesus, The Greatest Therapist Who Ever Lived*, he writes that “what Tommy couldn’t realize was that he was in the grips of unconscious beliefs. He unconsciously believed *he* was worthless, which was what made him so angry and reckless. Because he had never been cared for in the way that he needed, he had come to the unconscious conclusion that he didn’t deserve it. But because this was an unconscious belief, he experienced it as a fact. If you are *certain* that you are worthless, then you don’t have anything to lose. He didn’t believe anything could help, and he wanted to keep people at a distance to avoid the pain of being seen for what he thought he was.”²

The theory of unconscious thoughts or beliefs is, of course, a tenet of modern psychology. Psychiatrists, psychologists, and therapists all tell us that part of knowing ourselves comes from understanding the system of beliefs or thoughts that govern our behavior. One difficulty in addressing these systems is that most of us have never critically examined them. Without the benefit of therapy or counseling, for example, most of us don’t pay much attention to these hidden internal software programs that are

¹ Mark W. Baker, *Jesus, The Greatest Therapist Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 195.

² Ibid.

shaping our every day behavior – to use a computer metaphor. Well and good if the software is a healthy program. But what if faulty systems are in place that tend to make us keep repeating the same kind of negative behavior over and over again? Dr. Baker writes, “Unfortunately, people who have negative unconscious beliefs about themselves don’t see them as beliefs; they think these ideas reflect ‘just the way they are.’”³ It is also common that those who are locked into a negative assessment about themselves also tend to lock into fixed, negative assessments of those around them. Carried to the extreme, negative unconscious thoughts and beliefs can lead an individual to repeatedly engage in behaviors that are destructive to themselves and to those around them.

All of us here probably know at least one person very well who struggles with a pattern of repetitious addictive behavior. It might involve alcohol or drug abuse, an eating disorder, a gambling habit, a reliance on pornography, a tendency to mess up one relationship after another, or a pattern of digging in on any issue to such a degree that we are unable to budge or hear the truth when it comes to us.

Several years ago I read a humorous story in a column by Ann Landers, the well-known dispenser of advice. It seems that a woman had just disrobed in the bathroom and was getting ready to take a shower when the doorbell rang. She hollered out, “Who is it?” A man shouted back through the door, “It’s the blind man.” Figuring she was safe, she opened the door. The man looked at her in shock and somehow managed to ask, “Where do you want me to hang these blinds, lady?”⁴

Hidden, faulty assumptions and beliefs can make any of us blind.

One day as Jesus and his disciples see a man blind from birth, they ask him one of thorniest theological questions across the ages – is an affliction (whether it comes at birth or at any other point) sent by God as the punishment for sin. Proclaiming that no sin had caused this blindness, Jesus says, “It is urgent that we work the works of God who sent me while it is day; for night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Then he quickly makes a paste of clay

³ Ibid., 195-196.

⁴ Ann Landers, *The Washington Post*, October 13, 1998

mixed with spittle, spreads it on the man's eyes, and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam.

The man might have dismissed Jesus as just another of the false healers who had come his way across his lifetime, but he doesn't. Something leads him to listen and to make his way slowly to the pool and wash. To the astonishment of his neighbors and those in the community, he comes back able to see. In a scene that could be played for its comic timing, they began to debate whether this now sighted man is the same man who was blind. All the while he keeps saying, "It's me! I'm the man!"

It is when they say, "Then tell us how your eyes opened?" that the whole scene takes on a deeper and disturbing dimension. He says, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and told me to wash in the pool at Siloam. So I did. And I have received my sight."

At that point, the locals need a higher authority to ascertain exactly what is going on. They bring the man to the Pharisees in the synagogue who begin an interrogation of first the man, then his parents, and then the man again. When they discover that the miracle has occurred on the Sabbath, some of them say, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." The further and further the authorities get in their investigation, the more rigid and fixed they become. The more the man talks in explaining what happened to him, the more loyal he becomes to Jesus. He finally blurts out, "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." At that, the authorities have had enough. They say, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they banish him from the synagogue – which can be construed as a form of excommunication.

When Jesus hears what has happened, he finds the man and asks, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Tell me who that is," the man asks, "and I will believe." Jesus says, "You have seen him, and the one speaking to you is he." And the man makes the final step in his spiritual journey and says, "Lord, I believe."

Dr. Gail O'Day, a biblical scholar on the faculty at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, notes that "the man's growing awareness of the truth of Jesus' identity... underscores one of the story's central theological themes:

Blindness is not determined simply by seeing or not seeing, but by recognizing the revelation of the works of God in Jesus.”⁵

As an illustration of her point, the final scene in this drama has some of the Pharisees who overhear this exchange between Jesus and the new believer said, say to Jesus, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” He says, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

It is in these final scenes that Jesus reveals himself, according to Dr. Mark Baker, as “the greatest therapist who ever lived.” It is here that Jesus heals the unconscious belief system in the man born blind that has until this moment kept him as a helpless victim. And it is here in his final words to the authorities that he points to their negative unconscious belief system that is still operative, rigidly so.

Baker writes, “Jesus often challenged those with this kind of rigid thinking to be more flexible. He knew that if people are too rigid in their thinking, then they are often guilty of missing something important. Sometimes they miss important truths about others – and often also about themselves. These are the people whose ‘guilt remains’ even though they are absolutely certain they know what they are doing.”⁶ Dr. Baker’s “spiritual principle” based on this story from the ninth chapter of John is: “If you rigidly think you are right, think again.”⁷

Gosh, that cuts to the quick for all of us, doesn’t it? Many of us have positioned ourselves as the possessor of the only truth available at one time or the other. Whenever the need to be absolutely right affects our judgment, we, too, run the risk of being absolutely wrong.

One of the most popular novelists of the twentieth century was James A. Michener who produced a legacy of massive historical novels such as *Hawaii*, *The Source*, *Iberia* and many others. All of these novels were written with characters with extensive genealogies. The irony of Michener’s own life, however, is that he was a man without a birth certificate. He was

⁵ Gail O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 656. Dr. O’Day is professor of homiletics at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, in Atlanta, Georgia – one of our thirteen United Methodist seminaries.

⁶ Baker, 196.

⁷ Baker, 196.

abandoned as an infant and raised as a foster-son by a widowed member of the Michener family. While he was enormously appreciative of his foster family, he also struggled over the whole of his publishing career with an anonymous relative who felt compelled to write hateful letters whenever one of his novels became a best seller. Each letter was self signed from “a real Michener.” When Michener was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the relative accused him of being a fraud and said, “Who in hell do you think you are, trying to be better than you are?”⁸

In his memoir, Michener wrote that the “words of that cry are burned into my soul.”⁹ The letters could easily have helped shape an entire body of negative unconscious beliefs that might have destroyed him, perhaps as they were intended. When the letters finally quit coming, probably because of the death of his relative, Michener wrote, “He was right in all his accusations... I have spent my life trying to be better than I was, and am brother to all who have the same aspirations.”¹⁰

The greatest transformation of all is the power that comes from knowing that we belong to the family of God and specifically, that our relationship with Jesus Christ is the most important in our lives. With him on our side, we are empowered to move away from any blindness that may beset us into the full sight of his love and mercy.

Whose hand is it that we hold? That of the greatest therapist who ever lived, even the very Son of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ James A. Michener, *The World Is My Home, A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1992), 484-486.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.