

Sermon based on John 9:39

John 9:39: "That those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."

There is an old Irish folk saying: "I see said the blind man, but he couldn't see at all." We see that kind of contradiction in this text from John 9. It says the opposite. It is one of those conundrum phrases: "That those who do not see may see and those who see may become blind."

So what is it to see and what is it to become blind?

Example 1: Steve Jobs, the creative founder of the personal computer era, was diagnosed with a rare form of pancreatic cancer in 2003 at the age of 48. Shortly after his diagnosis he gave the commencement address at Stanford University. Quoting from that address:

"No one wants to die. Even people who go to heaven don't want to die to get there. Yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be because death is likely the single best invention of life. It is life-changing. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you. But some day, not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic but it is quite true. Your time is limited so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma which is living with the results of other peoples' thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice, heart, and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become."

What he is saying is that there is nothing this kind of hope cannot deliver because, after all, this is something that you generate yourself. It may be cold comfort. Hope in a hopeless world, but his claim is that life can be meaningful even if what you do will soon be dated, dusty, and discarded.

So what does one think about this gospel of this world? Of course, this is what most people think. When you're dead, you're dead, and you better grasp what is now because who knows? Our hope is to make whatever we can of ourselves, in his remarkable phrasing, from your own inner voice, heart, and intuition. That is the hope. That is what it is.

The information age which we are in, and Steve Jobs did not create that, it goes back to a major thinker in 1947. It goes back to bits, bits of information. All of our genetic code, all of what exists including the universe, can be reduced to bits, and that's what it is and that's all it is.

We then would say, that is a kind of idol and really goes against John 9:39: "That those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."

Example 2: The pope. The pope in Rome speaks infallibly when four conditions are fulfilled. 1) It has to be that the pope speaks. 2) That he speaks to the universal church, the whole church. 3) That he intends to define and that has to be clear, and 4) on faith and morals. At that point the brokenness and conditionedness and fragility of history is removed. It is what we sometimes call a miracle. It does not mean that the Pope is without sin. It does not mean that everything he says is infallible. In fact it is generally agreed that only twice in the nineteenth century and one in the twentieth. Nevertheless there was a point where the brokenness of life is removed. And we say, No. That is a kind of idol, a kind of miracle, and it goes against what it says here in John 9:39 as well as other things.

What about us? We ourselves are in general like Steve Jobs. We say what is true is what convinces me. What I am convinced by because I can see it works, and it is reasonable. And on top of that what is true is what my intuition, my experience tells me. And my experience tells me: This is the way things are and beyond that, that's it. We base ourselves on this kind of thinking. It does not really go back to the information age. It goes back to the seventeenth century great British thinker, John Locke. But that is what we call common sense.

Two examples. First, consider optical illusions. You look at them and your eyes and your mind are at first deceived. But then you can see through them. You see and you know that this is an illusion. And the same is true of light. We know that light has infra-red. We do not see infra-red but insects do. But we know that so we see through the problem. We say it is what we can see with our minds that way and with our five senses.

Example #2. Suppose that we had security cameras on every corner of Jerusalem after the crucifixion, not only for a couple of days or a couple of years, but, let's say until Jerusalem fell in the year 70. On these security cameras we see a person walking around, this one we know as Jesus. And we would say that his image is photo-shopped. And we would be right. That would be a trick. We would say: We can see through that. My reasoning says that does not happen. That is not real. We cannot depend on that.

Example #3. We then come alone with the idea that maybe there has to be something more. The Evil One comes in and says: There are spiritual experiences. And we hear about spiritual experiences. And what it really amounts to saying is: "I have my own personal, private miracle." It is really no different than that moment of papal infallibility. Lifting all the brokenness of life. And when we think about it, we say: Here my reason and common sense are lifted. I have my experience and it is really an idol. It is a place where I then claim the brokenness and limitations of life have been lifted for me. Maybe not others. But I know, and of course the Evil One has snatched us at that point. I want to read you from Martin Luther and how he does not give credit to any visions or revelations:

"I tell you what happened to me: On Good Friday last, I was in my room in fervent prayer when suddenly appeared upon the wall a bright vision of our Savior Christ, with the five wounds, steadfastly looking upon me, as if it had been Christ himself bodily. At first sight, I thought it was some heavenly revelation, but I reflected that it must be an illusion and juggling of the devil, for Christ appeared to us in his Word, and in a meaner, more humble form; therefore I spoke to the vision: 'Away with you, confounded devil! I know no other Christ than he who was crucified and who in his word is pictured and presented to me.' Whereupon the image vanished, clearly showing of whom it came."¹

That really is the same as Paul writes in Galatians 1:8: "If anyone preaches any other gospel, even I or an angel from heaven, let him be damned." That is strong language.

Then going on to the next chapter in 2:14 in his debate with Peter, he says Peter has to be rejected because he has gone against "the truth of the gospel." Not the gospel in general but "the truth of the gospel." So what is "the truth of the gospel"?

¹ *Table Talk* (WATR 1:287, 8-27).

We then are caught by the Evil One into thinking we can depend on our reasoning and experience, forgetting and omitting that we are caught in sin and death. Really, our reason cannot be depended on, not to speak of our experience. But we say that has to be it, that is it.

We remember, however, the Small Catechism: "I believe that by my own reasoning or understanding I cannot believe." We continually are tempted away from that.

The Catechism goes on to say: "The Holy Spirit is the one who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies." The light comes from him. But the Holy Spirit is not an experience, and he is not subject to our reason because we are caught in sin and death. Something we cannot face because we really do not want to face the First Commandment. The First Commandment says: "Thou shall have no other gods." We want to decide and think we should have some say in it, but we are caught in sin and death.

As Paul writes in Romans 3:4: "Let God be true though every man be false."

Throughout this chapter 9 in John and also 1 and 8 and 12, it says Jesus Christ is "the light of the world," and the light is Jesus and the cross. Other light is blindness.

The lectionary cuts off the last two verses of John 9, but they are important and go with the text: "Jesus said, 'For judgment I came into the world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, 'Are we also blind?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.'"

Amen.