

That those who do not see may see

John 9:1-41

A sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

“I see,” said the blind man as he picked up his hammer and saw.

We see that kind of contradiction at the end of the text from John for today: “For judgment I came into the world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind” (John 9:39).

What is it to see? To be blind? Three examples:

Example #1: Steve Jobs. He was a brilliant entrepreneur, who did remarkable things, and who sadly died in 2011 at the age of 56. In 2003, knowing the seriousness of his diagnosis (pancreatic cancer), he gave the commencement address at Stanford and said the following:

“No one wants to die. Even people who want to get to heaven don’t want to die to get there. Yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. That is as it should be. Death is life’s change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now, the new is you. But some day, not long from now, you will be the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it’s 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 people’s 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.”

On a practical level, it’s a poignant reminder that life is short and don’t be afraid to take risks, to be creative. But on another level, as a worldview or faith, the message is that the meaning of life is something each of us can and must generate within ourselves.

It’s a worldview that says: Life is what you make of it. So, make of it what you can and what you want because when you’re dead, you’re dead.

This way of living is a kind of an idol: I can see and judge. Exactly what the John 9:39 is about: “For judgment he came into this world that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”

Example #2. This one has to do with the infallibility of the Pope.

The pope in Rome speaks infallibly when four conditions are fulfilled. It has to be (1) that the Pope speaks, (2) that he speaks to the whole church, (3) that he intends to define

something, and (4) it's something on faith and morals. The Roman Catholic Church claims that when these four conditions are met, the Pope speaks infallibly, that is, the brokenness and fragility of history is lifted, removed.

This is the same as what we sometimes called "a miracle." It doesn't mean that the Pope is without sin, and it doesn't mean that everything he says is infallible. In fact, it is generally agreed to be the case that the conditions for infallibility have been met only twice in the 19th century (1854 Immaculate Conception of Mary, 1870 Papal Infallibility) and only once in the 20th century (1950 Assumption of Mary). To be sure, regarding earlier centuries, one could go back and discuss other such papal decisions. Nevertheless, there is a point where the brokenness of this world is lifted, removed.

We say: "Well, no." That's a kind of idol, a miracle, and it goes against what is said here in John 9:39, as well as other things.

What about us? We are more like Steve Jobs. What's true is what convinces me, what I am convinced by because I can see it work. It's reasonable, and on top of that, what my intuition tells me the way things are. Beyond that I cannot say or see. That's it.

We can even see with our mind's eye through optical illusions. At first your mind is deceived, and then you can see through them. The same is true for light. We know it has infrared radiation. We don't see infrared, although insects do. We know that, and therefore we can see through the problem. We can see, that is, with our minds and five senses.

Example #3: Spiritual experiences. There is also the idea that there has to be something more to life, so what happens then? The evil one comes in and whispers: "There are spiritual experiences." What it really amounts to is saying: "You should have your own private miracle, somewhat like the Pope himself, lifting all the brokenness of life. Here your reason and common sense are lifted. You should have an experience that convinces you." And that is really an idol, a place where you and I imagine the brokenness and the limitations of this world have been lifted for me. Not others, but "I know." At that point, the evil one has us in his grip.

Martin Luther said that something like that happened to him:

"I'll tell you what happened to me. I was in my room in fervent prayer when suddenly appeared upon the wall a bright vision of our Savior Jesus Christ, with the five wounds. He was looking down at me. He seemed to be truly there. At first, I thought it was a revelation from heaven, but as I thought about it more, I realized that it was an illusion, a trick of the devil, **for Christ appeared to us in his Word**, and in a meaner, more humble form. So, 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.' Then what happened is that **the vision vanished**, clearly showing of whom it came." (WATR 1:287, 8-27; emphasis added).

Luther is saying: "Don't put your trust in visions and experiences," but not just that. He is also saying the same as what Paul writes in Galatians 1:8: "If anyone preaches any other gospel, let him be damned." He goes on in Galatians 2:14 to rebuke Peter because he had gone against "the truth of the gospel." What is that?

Paul is saying that we are caught by the evil one whenever we think we can depend on our reason or on our personal experience, forgetting that we are caught in sin and death.

Our reason cannot be depended upon, nor can experiences, dreams, and the like. We resist that, thinking: "That has to be it. That is it."

But the truth is as Luther writes in the Small Catechism: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him."

We are continually tempted away from that, tempted by reason and by experience.

It goes on to say that the Holy Spirit is the one who calls and sanctifies, so light comes from him. The Holy Spirit is not an experience, and he's not subject to our reason because we're caught in sin and death. It's something we can't face because we really don't want to face the First Commandment: "Have no other gods."

We want to decide. We want to have some say in it, but we're caught in sin and death. As Paul writes in Romans 3:4: "Let God be true though every man be false." God is justified in his judgment. "No one is righteous, no not one" (Romans 3:10).

Throughout this chapter 9 in John and, also in John, chapters 1, 8, and 12, the message is: Jesus Christ is the light of the world, and the light is Jesus and the cross. All other light is blindness.

"For judgment I came into the world, that those who do not see may see, and that 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 would have no guilt, but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains."

They are caught, judged, found wanting, and so are we.

But John 9 is followed by John 10, and there we read: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep . . . I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." Amen