

BLIND SPOTS

Sermon for Pentecost 19, Proper 23: Mt 10:17-31

LPC, 10/11/09

I once knew a very saintly priest whom I admired deeply. She had many gifts to which I aspire. In particular, she was patient, readily compassionate, and hospitable. In other words, she possessed many gifts in which I find myself lacking and therefore admire all the more in others. She did have one blind spot however.

The diocese had determined to plant a new church within a few miles of my friend's church, and she saw the move as an encroachment on her own parish's evangelism efforts. I studied the matter and was convinced that the new church would pose no threat to her church. The new church was conceived to appeal to evangelicals with a very contemporary worship style. Since that was the kind of thing that would never be offered in my friend's church, it was apparent to me that the two churches would operate in entirely different markets. In other words, there was room for both.

My friend could never see it that way however, and whenever the subject of the new church came up she would snort and dismiss the subject. Now this was a very, very good woman. But on the subject of a new church in the area, she had a blind spot.

We all have blind spots. Of course, since they are *blind* spots, we can't see them in ourselves. If we are going to become aware of them, we need someone else to tell us what we can't, or won't, see. Such a person is hard to find. It takes someone who is shrewd enough to observe in us what we can't see ourselves. Then, not only must the person be shrewd, he or she must be able to communicate to us in a trustworthy way. Finally, the person must be brave and confident. Because people don't usually react very well when confronted with their own blind spots.

The first reaction to being confronted with a blind spot is usually denial. After all, it's in the nature of blind spots to be undetectable. If you don't see it, it's easy to believe it's not there. So, in the unlikely event someone is able to point out our blind spots, we are likely to respond in anger or dismissal. "How can you say I'm stingy? Or arrogant? Or self-centered? What do you mean I'm addicted to alcohol? Or attention? Or power?"

If we do manage to hear, understand and trust what we're being told about our blind spots, there's no guarantee that we can do anything about them. Our blind spots tend to be some of the most deeply rooted parts of our personalities. We are unlikely to even want to try to root them out. Even when we try to root them out, we often fail. It's enough to drive a person to grief.

The man in today's gospel reading from Mark has a blind spot. Like my friend who resented the new church plant, this is a good person. He has kept all the commandments. He aspires to eternal life. He wants to follow Jesus. But he has a blind spot.

Jesus is the shrewd, trustworthy, brave and confident person this man needs to identify his blind spot. Jesus tells the man that that he is attached to his possessions. This attachment will always stand in the way of his being able to achieve his obvious goal of living a holy life.

The man hears, understands and trusts what Jesus says. He doesn't try to deny it. He recognizes the truth. But he cannot accept it. He knows giving away his possessions is something he could never do. So, the narrative tells us, he goes away grieving.

This man is us. At least he personifies a common blind spot among us. In a prosperous country like ours, where people generally have many possessions, attachment to possessions may be the number-one barrier to a holy life.

Chances are every one of us here has a blind spot when it comes to possessions, including our money. We tend to blind ourselves to the fact that all our possessions, including our money, ultimately belong to God. We reject the notion that when we give we are but returning something to God. Outside of our families, we grasp and hoard and parse out grudgingly. When we give to the church or other charities we rationalize that we are giving according to what the institution is worth to us. What if God gauged his generosity to us according to this value-added standard? What if God withheld from us in proportion to what we withhold from God?

But, to go back to the story, is it even possible to sell all you have, if you have family, if you have responsibilities? St. Francis of Assisi sold all he had and gave to the poor, but who else?

The point is that doing what Jesus asks of us is basically impossible. Entering heaven is impossible. We may think we're good people (most of us probably do) but in actuality, taking our blind spots into account, we can basically forget about being good enough for eternal life. No one is good but our Father in heaven.

Still, we don't have to go away sorrowing at the impossibility of seeing, never mind overcoming, our blind spots. Because for God nothing is impossible. God has the power. This story from Matthew teaches a radical trust in this God who both sheds light on our blind spots and overcomes them.

Don't be misled: following Jesus means light will fall on our blind spots, and we may not like it. We may deny. We may go away grieving. We may steadfastly refuse to look upon that to which we would prefer to be blind.

Fortunately, there are no barriers to eternal life that God cannot overcome. Jesus shines light into our blind spots, not to bar us from eternal life but that we may have eternal life. Not for nothing is Jesus known as the giver of sight to the blind.