



# The New England Church Pulpit

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SEEING WITH THE LITTLE GRAY CELLS

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Christianity

John 9.1-41 (abbreviated)

*As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. I come to proclaim that I am the light of the world." Then he spat on the ground and made mud with his saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." The man did as he was told and his sight was restored.*

*Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus opened the man's eyes. Some of the Pharisees said "This Jesus is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others among them said, "How can a man who is not from God perform such signs?" Since they were divided among them, they asked the blind man himself, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man said, "He is a prophet."*

*Threatening the man with expulsion from the synagogue for confessing Jesus to be the Messiah, they commanded him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man Jesus is a sinner and not from God." The man answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner or from God. The one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see. Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 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." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, which is why you were blind. Are you trying to undermine our teaching?" And they drove him out.*

Jainism

Vitaragastava 13.1

*Lord, you are the uninvoked savior, motiveless compassionate being, a well-wisher even when unprayed, a friend even when unrelated.*

I am a long-time follower of Agatha Christie's egg-shaped-bald-headed, meticulously groomed, large-moustached private detective Hercule Poirot. He's the short man with an ego bigger than all outdoors whose pursuit of murderers and perpetrators of crime never fails to be successful. It is so precisely because he uses his "little gray cells of the brain" to solve the mysteries, distrusting what he sees with the eyes. He operates solely on the principle that the truth is blinded by what the eye sees, that one never trust the eye to see all.

This story in John's gospel is illustrative of this common indulgence of looking but not really seeing. Most of us who are sighted are blind to possibilities beyond what we see, for what we see with our eyes distracts us from mindful sight, of insight, of seeing with the little gray cells of the brain and the heart. We've trusted conventional wisdom that has taught us that "seeing is believing." Not so, says Poirot and the blind man Jesus heals.

He lives in a society that only sees things one way: if you are blind, you or your parents have sinned. They see a man who is blind from birth, and they need to look no further. There's no other explanation, for blindness was unequivocally the punishment of God for sin. Their debate is superficially focused on who sinned rather than celebrating the man's new-found sight. They are blind to the possibility that this has nothing to do with God's punishment and everything to do with their own prejudice. They, who proclaim themselves sinless, want the man to stay blind for he is a sinner. The debate that ensues about whether someone from God would dare to heal on the Sabbath distracts from the insight that Jesus has given this man a new lease on life. When they try to rope the formerly blind man into the debate, his sight becomes insight: "I don't know whether this guy is God or Satan. All I know is that once I was blind, and now I see. That's enough to know." It disarms the argument, sending the accusers away all the more steeped in their own blind prejudice. What they see—or want to see-- doesn't tell the whole truth.

Jacques Lusseyran, a blind French author and political activist, wrote a book entitled "And There Was Light," recounting his own journey from sight to blindness to insight. Unlike the man in John's story, he was not born blind, but was blinded at the age of eight when the glasses he was wearing were shattered in a scuffle at school.

Lusseyran had to learn a whole new way of living. Fortunately for him, his parents resisted the temptation to coddle him in the present moment in favor of building character for the future. They refused to pity him, never speaking of the "night" into which his blindness had pushed him, teaching him not to see himself as a victim and keeping him in public schools so he could learn to function in the seeing world. Because of this, he never thought of himself as a poor blind boy but rather the discoverer of a new world in which the light outside of him moved inside to show him things he might never have found any other way. Just ten days after his accident, he made the following statement:

[The source of light] was not obliterated...I had only to receive it...This was something entirely new, you understand, all the more so since it contradicted everything that those who have eyes believe. The source of light is not in the outer world. We believe that is true only because of a common delusion. The light dwells where the life also dwells: within ourselves.

Insight for an eight-year-old child.

He was not speaking only metaphorically or theologically but also literally, for he learned that enlightenment had nothing to do with his eyes. With practice, he learned to attend so carefully to the world around him that he could describe things he could not see with details those who were sighted could not. He could tell trees apart by the sounds of their shadows, distinguishing different types of trees by the sound of their leaves in the wind. "The oak, the poplar, the nut tree have their own specific levels of sound," he wrote. He could tell how tall or wide a wall was by the pressure it exerted on his body.

The problem with seeing the regular way, Lusseyran wrote, is that sight naturally prefers outer

appearances. It attends to the surface of things, which makes it an essentially superficial sense. We let our eyes skip over trees, furniture, traffic, and faces, too, often mistaking sight for perception—which is easy to do when our eyes work so well to help us orient ourselves in space.

We glide so quickly over things with our eyes that we are not mindful of the nature of the things we see. Fingers do not glide, Lusseyran said. To feel a table is a much more intimate activity than seeing it. Run your hands across the top and you can find the slight dip in the middle of the center panel or the feel the dents made by the silverware of those who sat at the table.

(This excerpt is from Barbara Brown Taylor's new book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.)

Contrary to our assumptions, Lusseyran said that sight began only after he was blinded. The truth lies beyond the obvious, hidden in plain sight in what we see with our eyes but miss with the little gray cells of our brain. It reminds me of the little ditty:

“Two men looked out from prison bars. One saw mud and the other saw stars.”

Our eyes betray us and our understanding of God is often limited to what we can see with our eyes. Our judgment is distorted by our ocular observations; the color of skin—whether determined by race or tattoo; the clothes a person wears; the disfigured face or deformed teeth influence our perceptions of people. We may very much want to look past those things, but we have to work very hard to overcome the value judgment our eyes determine. Seeing only with the eye prejudices our understanding.

With my eyes, I see an Asian woman, a black man, a poor child, a sick girl, a wild boy, a successful businesswoman, a powerful executive, a lazy man or a murderer. When I close my eyes, I see God. The mud that is my eyelids transforms the obvious into the truth.

Seeing has made us blind by giving a superficial confidence that one quick glance can tell us what it's all about. The eyes trick us into believing we have a clear view of how things really are. Our sight blinds us because we believe that what we see is the whole picture. How many times have we thought at the darkest moment of our life that there was no way out; that this is the worst thing that can happen to us because we can't see past the present circumstances. In time, that sight becomes insight, and looking back we see hidden strengths and different pathways we didn't even know were there until we were forced to take them. Hindsight is 20/20, as they say, because from a distance of time, we realize that what we saw then was only the detail of a larger picture.

Sight deceives us. Looking for grass that is always greener on the other side of the fence distracts us from seeing the lush, life-giving moments that are right under our nose. A tree is more than a trunk with branches and leaves; it has a voice we cannot see with our eyes. A person is more than their skin and their actions and their circumstances; they are the image of God we cannot see with our eyes. The tragedy of a moment may seem like the end of the world but looks deceive; there is more life in it than the moment one can see with one's eyes. God redeems the obvious when, blinded to all that we think we know, sight becomes insight.

And how do we know but that the mud in our eye is actually our salvation?

--Gary L. McCann