

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 26, 2017**

**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**John 9:1-41**

**For Reflection**

**"There is a condition worse than blindness, and that is, seeing something that isn't there."**  
- Thomas Hardy, English Novelist (1840-1928)

**"We're blind to our blindness. We have very little idea of how little we know. We're not designed to know how little we know."**  
- Daniel Kahneman, Israeli Psychologist (b.1934)

**Here's Mud in Your Eye**

We've been reading and discussing the UCC curriculum on "White Privilege."  
<http://privilege.uccpages.org/>

One of the points that has been made clearly is that we who have privilege are often blind to it. Rev. Traci Blackmon makes a series of statements that help us to open our eyes:

- If you grew up with an expectation that images on TV, in books, and at movie theaters would share your racial identity, you have white privilege.
- If you have NEVER felt the burden of "representing your race," you have white privilege.
- If you have NEVER been presumed as intellectually inferior or incapable solely because of the color of your skin, you have white privilege.
- If you can presume that history courses offered in your school will provide a narrative about people who look like you, you have white privilege.
- If this country has NEVER debated the monetary value of all the people who look like you, you have white privilege.
- If there have NEVER been laws passed to prevent your full participation in democracy, you have white privilege.
- If you have NEVER been categorized based solely on the color of your skin, you have white privilege.

Blindness to our own privilege makes us blind to the effects of that privilege on others. Race privilege is not the only one. We can also be blind to privilege based on gender, sexual orientation, claimed religion, physical ability, age or class.

In this text from the Gospel of John, the physically blind young man is disbelieved by the Pharisees – those who have the power to restore him to community or relegate him to outcast status (as blind, leprous, bleeding or otherwise “sinful” people are wont to be.) They consult his parents about what happened. And the parents suggest: ‘Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’

His blindness is presumed to be a mark of sinfulness; this and his age make him dismiss-able. Those in power who are able-sighted and older are blind to the truth of what has happened to this no-longer-blind-young man.

Our brains, for some reason, create filters through which we “see” – interpret – the world. Our experiences, opinions and ideas passed to us by parents and teachers, cultural assumptions and class systems – all of these things contribute to the way in which we perceive other people and situations. And most of the time, our brains don’t stop to explain which filter will be used to interpret the information coming at us.

Excuse me Anne, this is your brain speaking. You are about to meet a White, 60-year-old, Republican, Christian man from Atlanta, Georgia. Please be aware that you have preconceived notions about each one of these descriptors and set them aside so that you can actually meet this person authentically. His brain is asking him to do the same thing.

Our brains don’t work this way naturally.

Our natural inclination is to quickly make judgments formed in our reptilian brain – in order to assess the level of threat and survive the encounter. This is very old, unconscious, blind behavior – which can serve us well in a dark parking lot – but not so much in a well-lit room where we are called upon to encounter a diversity of people and appreciate and learn from our differences with grace.

So, we have to train ourselves to remove filters including the fear or anxiety filters. We have to enhance our other senses in order to compensate for our blindness: senses like feelings of compassion and curiosity, admission of our own ignorance and limitations, openness to learning and asking questions. We have to train ourselves to ask questions and listen to the answers, observe rather than prejudge. There is an unnatural level of self-awareness called for in order to do this. It takes work. It can be done. Especially by Democrats. (That was a joke.)

These filters don't just influence the way **we see the world**. Our experiences, opinions and ideas passed to us by parents and teachers, cultural assumptions and class systems – all of these things contribute to the way in which **we perceive ourselves**.

I grew up knowing that I was not considered beautiful and had to make up for that with personality.

I grew up in a middle-class, dogmatically Liberal family – knowing that White people were bigots and oppressors – so I internalized a self-hatred for my race and class.

I grew up grateful to be a female because we weren't at the top of the power pyramid and could claim some amount of oppression – but I was also fearful of being harassed and attacked by males at the top.

I have a brain chemistry that sucks up serotonin too fast – so Anxiety is a filter that was the norm for 40 years of my life.

Voices in my head (normal sounding voices, not the psychotic ones) tell me I'm a failure for not doing my best every minute of the day, for not saving the world in time, for being twice divorced, for being the "worst mother ever" (guess whose voice that is!) or the "worst daughter ever" or an inadequate wife or a failure as a minister.

Low self-image isn't even half of the result of these filters.

Guilt, shame, invisibility, targeting, victimization, neglect – all of these things color our perceptions of ourselves. All of these messages or voices or images are filters through which we see ourselves. They blind us to our own strengths and capabilities, our real beauty and true awesomeness.

And then there are the filters that make us look good to ourselves and, hopefully, others. These filters motivate us to be our best – give us the self-confidence to be actors and dancers and musicians – to stand up in front of a classroom and share knowledge – to trust that we are doing a good job as parents, employees, students, humans.

If these filters are exaggerated, however, they can give us an exaggerated sense of self-worth. They can blind us to the point of believing our point of view is always right – that our G-d and our beliefs are the only RIGHT ones – that we deserve our power over others – that our facts are the better "alternative facts."

The challenge for any of us as humans being – the challenge is to have an appreciation for REALITY – to have enough self-criticism to remain humble – to have enough self-worth to be confident in our relationships.

The challenge is to allow our experiences and encounters with others to broaden our understandings – to teach our brains to hold up several filters at once for examination and either conclusion or the introduction of new questions.

The challenge is to grow our emotional spectrum – AND learn to regulate it.

The challenge is to identify and remove our blinders – to grow in wisdom rather than economic and political power.

The powerful people in this biblical story couldn't seem to do this. They pre-judged Jesus as a threat to them and their view of the world. They asked the wrong people and even the right people all the wrong questions. The irony of the metaphor for healing here is that the man with mud in his eyes is the one who can ultimately see the presence of G-d in his life. Those who claim to know the Truth are the blind ones.

I challenge all of us to continue the holy work of removing those filters that distort our perceptions and blind us to both our privilege and our essential goodness. May we continue to challenge each other, hold each other accountable and celebrate the insights that enhance our life together.

People of G-d: "Here's mud in your eye."

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INSTALLATION of Officers

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Children's Time            "What blind people see..."            (sack/objects to feel)

**John 9:1-41**

9 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 3 Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' 6 When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, 7 saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8 The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' 9 Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' 10 But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' 11 He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' 12 They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14 Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' 16 Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. 17 So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

18 The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19 and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' 20 His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23 Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

24 So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' 25 He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' 26 They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' 27 He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' 28 Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' 30 The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32 Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' 34 They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

35 Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' 36 He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' 37 Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' 38 He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. 39 Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' 40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' 41 Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.'

## **DOC – AN ORDER FOR THE INSTALLATION OF LEADERS IN THE CHURCH**

Dear friends, you have been called by God and chosen by the people of God  
for leadership in the church.

This ministry is a blessing and a serious responsibility.

It recognizes your special gifts and calls you to work among us and for us.

In love we thank you for accepting your obligation

and challenge you to offer your best to God, to this people, and to our ministry in the world.

Live a life in Christ and make the Spirit known in your witness and your work.

Will you devote yourself to the service of God in the world? **I will.**

Will you so live so that you enable this church to be a people of love and peace? **I will.**

Will you do all in your power to be responsible to the task for which you have been chosen? **I will.**

### *To the congregation:*

Dear friends, rejoice that God provides laborers for the vineyards.

Will you do all you can to assist and encourage them

in the responsibilities to which they have been called,

giving them your cooperation, your counsel, and your prayers?

### *The congregation responds:*

**We will.**

Let us pray.

Almighty God, pour out your blessings upon these your servant leaders  
who have been given particular ministries in your church.

Grant them grace to give themselves wholeheartedly in your service.

Keep before them the example of Jesus

who did not think first of himself, but lived his life for us all.

Let them share his ministry and consecration,

that they may enter into his joy.

Guide them in their work.

Reward their faithfulness with the knowledge

that through them your purposes are accomplished. Amen.