Sermon In A Sentence: Jesus comes to bring us light – to open our eyes that we might see – and we must choose whether to do so or not.

The Gospel of John isn’t always easy to understand. It often tells a story on two levels. Take the Gospel lesson for today. On the simplest level, it’s the story of Jesus healing a blind man – and offending the Pharisees by healing the man on the Sabbath. Most anyone can understand a simple story like that. At this simple level, it resembles other healing stories in the Gospels. Jesus heals all sorts of people – lepers – a woman with a hemorrhage – and so forth. We appreciate such healing stories, because we know that someday we might be sick. Perhaps Jesus will heal us.

But, in John’s Gospel, there’s usually a story behind the story – a deeper meaning. In our Gospel lesson today, the deeper meaning has to do with vision – spiritual vision – the ability to see what’s really important. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus heals a blind man, who begins to see all sorts of things. Not only does he see trees and flowers and neighbors and loved ones, but he also sees something special about the one who healed him. As we move through the story, the blind man’s understanding – his vision of Jesus – expands and grows:

After he was healed, his neighbors asked what happened. The man was able to say only that Jesus had put mud on his eyes – sent him to wash – and healed him of his blindness.

Later, his vision grew to the point where he could describe Jesus as a prophet.

Still later, his vision blossomed to the point that he believed in Jesus and worshiped him.

That would still be a pretty simple story, but something else is going on in the background as well. The healing took place on the Sabbath. Jewish law said, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). It forbade work on the Sabbath. That was Torah law – God’s law – one of the Ten Commandments.

So when the Pharisees learned that Jesus had healed a man on the Sabbath, they asked whether that was necessary:

Was the man going to die if Jesus waited another day? No, he wasn’t going to die. He had been blind all his life. What was one more day?

Well, then, is there some other reason why Jesus couldn’t wait until the next day? Was Jesus planning to leave town so that he would not see the blind man again? Again, the answer was no. Sabbath law prohibited travel on the Sabbath, so the blind man and Jesus
would still be in the same place when the Sabbath ended. Why couldn’t Jesus wait until sundown – the end of the Sabbath – before healing this man?

The Pharisees concluded that Jesus had performed unnecessary work on the Sabbath – dishonoring the Sabbath – but more importantly, dishonoring God.

But still there was the blind man to deal with – the man whose sight had been miraculously restored. The Pharisees couldn’t ignore him. They discussed the matter among themselves:

Some of them thought that, indeed, Jesus must be a true prophet from God. Others thought not. After all, there were charlatans then – just as there are charlatans today. Such people can dazzle you into believing what they want you to believe. They can talk you into buying prayer handkerchiefs – and throwing away your crutches – and giving them money. They can do signs and wonders just like Jesus. How can you tell the good guys from the bad?

The Pharisees applied a simple test. However good something might look, if it violates God’s law, it’s bad.

Now that’s a pretty good test. If I had been a Pharisee in that time and place, I would have been pretty comfortable with that test. No matter how good something looks, if it violates God’s law, it’s bad. In fact, I would be comfortable with that today.

But the Pharisees made a couple of mistakes:

First of all, the law about not healing people on the Sabbath was not God’s law. It was how the Pharisees had interpreted God’s law. God said that people should keep the Sabbath holy – that they should honor God by not working on the Sabbath. Over the centuries, Jewish scholars debated what that meant. They specified in great detail what you could and could not do on the Sabbath. God’s law never told them not to perform works of mercy – works of compassion – on the Sabbath. It was not God’s law that Jesus had broken, but the law that these men had developed. That was the Pharisee’s first mistake, and it was a big one.

Second, the Pharisees were important – educated – prosperous – respected – and it went to their heads. They assumed they had the answers, so they closed their minds to new ideas. They closed their eyes and thought that they were seeing everything there was to see. That was their second mistake, and that was a big one too.
So when Jesus came onto the scene, they took a look at the wonderful things he was doing – and labeled him a lawbreaker – and dismissed any possibility that he might be who he seemed to be – a prophet – sent from God – a man whose word they needed to hear.

It’s so easy to see and yet not to see. It’s so easy to have the answer right under your nose and never realize it.

Back at the beginning – before personal computers changed our lives – the folks at Xerox decided to establish a research center in Palo Alto, California. They called it the Palo Alto Research Center – P-A-R-C – PARC for short. They wanted the PARC researchers to look into the future and create products that would lead Xerox into the next decade – and the next century.

And it worked! The people at PARC invented some wonderful things. In 1977, four years before IBM came out with their personal computer, PARC conducted a “Futures Day” where they showed off their inventions to the Xerox execs. Guess what they had invented:

They had invented the personal computer. They called it the Alto.
They had invented the mouse. You could use their mouse to draw pictures on the computer.
They had come up with other ideas – networked printers – electronic file servers – the ability to send files around the world electronically.

But the Xerox executives didn’t care much for what they were seeing. They were copier people. They had a great business going. What did they know about computers? Who would buy one of those things anyway? Why would they want to make it possible for employees to draw pictures on a computer screen with something called a mouse? A mouse, for goodness sakes! Why would you call it a mouse? Mice are pests! If you have mice, you call an exterminator!

But some of the Xerox executives brought their wives to “Futures Day” – and their wives loved the computer and the mouse. Many of them had been secretaries, and they could see how the computer and mouse would transform a secretary’s life – would transform the whole office environment. But the executives refused to listen. And so they left the computer – and the mouse – and all the other innovations – on the table.

A year or two later, a couple of kids in San Jose – not far from Palo Alto – working out of a garage – picked those ideas off the table and put them to work. They called their computer the Apple. They didn’t have much money, but they had their eyes open. They had a vision. And the personal
computer industry was born! And Xerox kept on making copiers – and facing increasing competition. Soon they were struggling – and watching the future go by!

They had seen the future, but had left it on the table. They had owned the future, but let it slip through their fingers.

Sometimes the really smart people are the last to see. That is how it was with the Xerox executives. That is also how it was with the Pharisees.

The blind man could see Jesus, but the Pharisees could not.

The blind man could see that Jesus was a man of God – but the Pharisees thought that Jesus was a lawbreaker.

The blind man could see that the messiah had come, but the Pharisees could say only, “We are disciples of Moses!” (v. 28).

Are we ever like that? Do we miss the obvious truth under our nose? We surely do!

Through it all, Christ brings us into the light. He causes the scales to drop from our eyes. He spits in the dirt, applies mud to our eyes, and sends us to the pool to wash away the darkness. Sometimes our eyes clear up immediately, and we see life in dramatically different ways. Sometimes our eyes clear up little by little, as we walk with Christ over a lifetime. For most of us, it’s a bit of both – a bit of right now and a bit of tomorrow!

Christ can give us clarity of vision and purpose to make life worth living – not to make life comfortable – not to make life easy – but to make life worth living.

It can be uncomfortable to come out of the darkness into the light. It can be disorienting. But it can also be beautiful! Jesus invites us into his beautiful light.

Or we can do as the Pharisees did. We can decide that we already know all that we need to know. We can stay in our comfort zone and continue to live as we’ve always lived. We can close our eyes and pretend to see.

The choice is ours.

Peace friends,

Chuck