**Blind Spots** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Reformation Sunday The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 126; Mark 10:46-52 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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Generally speaking, we don’t like to *admit mistakes* any more than we like to *make them.* Shame messes with our fragile egos. Many people see little upside in acknowledging any behavior that might portray them in a negative light.

This is interesting because *Sam Maglio* and *Taly Reich* wanted to see if they could *flip* this perspective. Both are associate professors of marketing, Maglio at the University of Toronto Scarborough and Reich at the Yale School of Management. What they found through their research *in the world of online purchasing* was that customers who admitted in their customer reviews to making a previous purchasing *mistake* actually garnered more trust and respect from would-be buyers than those who wrote reviews without mentioning a mistake in their purchasing experience.

And so, through *lab experiments* involving customer choice between different headphone brands, florist services, and breath mints, *each participant was shown one of two reviews.* The reviews were identical in nature, *except* in one of them *the reviewer expressed personal dissatisfaction with a previous purchase.* Instead of judging negatively those who admitted to a previous mistake through the public forum of an online review, *a high percentage of potential purchasers were attracted to their advice.* Reflecting on the research, Reich said, *“We would probably have a better world if we could take the shame out of admitting and learning from our mistakes.”*

*Life begins when we learn from our failures*, a popular adage has it. I wonder, though, if life really takes off when we *admit* our failures. For example, the first step of the *12-step program* is admitting *powerlessness* and *failure* in overcoming an addiction. In a similar way, good public defenders know that clients able to acknowledge *personal mistakes* have a better chance of being honest with themselves. The *courage* to admit wrong is at the heart of Christianity as well, a humility that, for many, brings forgiveness to life.

Peter Marty reminds us [during this election season] that *a prior step* to admitting mistakes that our nation has made would be to *acknowledge the limits of our own vision.* Much like Christians who confess things done and left undone, our reckoning with societal shortcomings ought to involve *what we see and don’t see.* Only if we commit to trying to discover the *blind spots* in our understanding will we find them.

As but one example, contemplate the irony of the *Statue of Liberty.* Liberty is depicted as a woman in a time when women didn’t even have the right to vote. The 1883 Emma Lazarus poem on the statue’s pedestal, identifying America’s warm embrace of the outsider, hardly represented what African Americans felt at the time. In a striking dissonance, Chinese laborers helped build the statue’s base—just a year after the blatantly racist Chinese Exclusion Act was passed.

*Gaping blind spots in all our perspectives are inevitable.* It’s admitting to their presence that’s the beginning of a better world.

Let’s consider these things in light of our gospel reading from Mark this morning.

You see, *healing stories* in the Gospels never seem to be simply a reversal of physical misfortune. A paralyzed man stands and walks. A man stretches out a withered hand to Jesus and sees it become useful again. A girl who was pronounced dead awakens.

Particularly suspicious are the stories of those who *“once were blind, but now they see.”* In fact, the connections between *seeing* and *believing* are so strong in the Gospel accounts that these miracles worked through Jesus almost always seem more about *growing in faith* than taking off dark glasses. Though Bartimaeus was blind to many things, *he clearly saw who Jesus was.* Seeing *“who Jesus is”* is the goal of faith, and it leads to discipleship. *Only the unblind can see where to follow.* Indeed, at the end of the story we’re told that this is exactly what happened. Bartimaeus regained his sight and *followed* Jesus on the way. Given that the very next verse in Mark narrates the entry into Jerusalem, the way Bartimaeus followed was the way to the cross.

And so, *physical sight* is not required for discipleship, *but restoration is.* Again and again in history, prophetic witness and gospel, God works through miracle, through political forces, through social action and through ordinary living to pick us up from where we have fallen and redirect us along right pathways. *Blind Bartimaeus* calls from the gutter until the Lord hears him. Then he returns to the Lord and is restored. *I picture him, the last recruit in the discipleship army, marching toward Jerusalem with a palm branch in hand.*

This idea of *return* is important--those who *return* to the Lord are *restored,* the Bible instructs. *But how do we come to the point of return?* Sometimes we make it sound easy and quick. I’m fairly skeptical of the 180-degree, born-again, overnight kind of return. Some changes are no doubt fast and immediate, but the changes that *endure* unto the generations are the result of a process of human or divine origin. Our return to the Lord for restoration is a process which may be described in many ways—and *Reformation* is one of those ways.

You see, as people of the 21st century, we may be more in tune with some of reformation’s *synonyms,* which also begin with “r”: *renovation, reorganization, restructuring.* These are, interestingly, words we use in large corporate settings rather than small personal ones. For example, the church, the corporate body of Christ, is a voice that calls for *the wandering* to *return* and then hosts the *restoration banquet.* In order to fulfill this mission, it must constantly be reformed.

And yet most church folk know all too well that many *“r” words* can be fighting words in congregations. While many Protestant congregations (especially Lutheran ones) are willing to celebrate the Reformation of October 31, 1517, with pride and pomp, reformation’s synonyms—*renovate, reorganize, restructure*—can be sources of conflict. All of these words indicate that something will be *changed.* And change is often heard as a synonym for *“loss.”*

My wife shared with me a work experience she had when implementing a new software system at the university where she was employed. They had a meeting of those involved in the implementation, with a facilitator, to talk about change management. As an exercise, the facilitator asked everyone to change something about themselves. Some removed an earring, a necklace, a shoe. The facilitator asked them to change something again. Sweaters and belts came off, as well as socks. The facilitator continued to challenge the group again to change something about themselves, and after a while, the group started to worry that they were all going to end up in their underwear or worse! The facilitator finally stopped the exercise before it came to that, and observed: “When I asked you to change something about yourself, you all interpreted that to mean losing something, removing something. But you could have changed something about yourself by adding something, moving something. Change doesn’t always mean loss.”

We, of course, enjoy 20/20 *hindsight vision,* proud of reformations in the past even as we are *blind* to the present need for reformation and restoration. This is true not only of the 16th century, but of the 21st century as well.

Last year, for instance, our nation recognized the 60th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s *“I Have a Dream”* speech. Though the reformation of racism in America is ongoing, much has changed in the past 60 years—and yet much still remains to be done. When King was preaching and protesting in the ’60s, many of the adults around me were shaking their heads and lamenting all the trouble he was causing. Decades later, this *“troublemaker”* is a martyr and a hero, whose birthday is a national holiday. I continue to be amazed at our collective blindness to the effects of racism and poverty, both then and now. My adult children shake their heads at the stories of segregation in schools, restaurants and doctors’ offices, unable to believe such things took place in their parents’ and grandparents’ lifetimes.

*These are the rhythms of reformation.* The troublemakers become heroes. The radical new ways eventually become beloved traditions. *We are always moving from blindness to sightedness, from unfaithfulness to faithfulness.* On days such as this, I am less interested in how the church *was reformed* than I am in recalling *the lessons* of reformation. Reformations teach us that we continue to need reform.

With this in mind, Mary W. Anderson, a Lutheran Pastor in South Carolina, asks: *What corners of the church, of society, need serious reformation in this 21st century? Where are our blind spots? Will a reformer arise among us? Should one arise, what will we do to him or her? What do we allow to go unchallenged today that will one day cause our grandchildren and great grandchildren to shake their heads at how blind we were to the gospel?*

These questions are particularly pertinent to this election season and some words from the Confession of 1967, part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA, bring clarity and shed light on this fraught moment:

*Although nations may serve God’s purposes in history, the church identifies the sovereignty of any one nation or any one way of life with the cause of God denies the Lordship of Christ and betrays its calling.”*

In a similar way, the Editorial Board of the Christian Century Magazine, the flagship monthly publication of Mainline Protestantism, said:

*A lot of Americans are unhappy with their options in this election. Anti-MAGA conservatives feel like they don’t have a party anymore. Progressives are frustrated with Democratic policies on fossil fuel extraction, the southern border, the war in Gaza, and more. Many people are finding it hard to give either presidential candidate their wholehearted support.*

*Churches, of course, aren’t allowed to. Neither is this magazine. While this rule comes courtesy of the IRS, there is also theological wisdom in keeping partisanship at arm’s length. And we shouldn’t expect any political program to usher in the kingdom of God.* ***But*** *voting in a general election doesn’t require our endorsement or loyalty. It just requires making an informed, pragmatic choice between two options. Then we get on to the deeper, more difficult work of politics.*

*To engage in that work, we don’t need a president who reflects our deepest moral vision.* ***We do, however, need a president committed to democracy, equal rights, and the rule of law.*** *Such baseline commitments in the halls of power are a necessary condition for effective organizing and advocacy outside those halls. They are the water in which political action swims. Our democratic system relies on a president [as well as members of Congress and the Judiciary] who seeks to strengthen that system rather than undermine it, to make it work for the many rather than enrich the few. The fact that some will read this paragraph as partisan shows just how much our democratic health has decayed.*

*Party and policy views aside, we need a president who seeks to preserve what’s left of that health, and it isn’t partisan or one-sided to say so. We need to vote now, pragmatically and without angst, so that we can keep doing the deeper work of politics tomorrow.*

Which brings us back to our Gospel reading, the point of which is that we disciples of Jesus [and humans generally] often have *vision problems—*we need clarity and wisdom. We sometimes describe our blindness as an inability to see the forest for the trees, but that’s a benign analysis. More worrisome is the inherited blindness of each generation, which so often assumes it is the best generation of all, with no lessons left to learn, only an inheritance to enjoy. This arrogance is the root of our blindness. *We still need the miracle of restored sight.*