

## **Sermon: Surely, We Are Not Blind**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 19, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Image is everything.” That is a quote by tennis star Andre Agassi in 1990, in a wildly successful advertising campaign by Canon, for the Eos Rebel line of camera. In the commercial, we see Agassi swinging a tennis racket, driving a jeep, or suntanning by a pool, while the Canon camera was being introduced. We see Agassi in a pink swimming trunk, or in a white t-shirt and blue jeans, or dressed in a white suit with a black shirt, lowering a pair of oversize sunglasses, looking directly at the audience with a smirk, and uttered that phrase: “Image is everything”.

Sure, he was criticized by some for endorsing style over substance, but the commercial catapulted Agassi from being just a tennis star to a fashion icon of the 90’s. That ad campaign was so successful, Canon made another one with Agassi three years later, promoting the Eos Rebel III line, still with the same tagline of ‘Image is everything’.

That tagline, that statement, ironically, became somewhat prophetic, a projection of what would become a widely accepted reality. Image has become everything. One does not even have to leave the house to see how images have impacted our lives, from selfies to Facebook, from Instagram to TikTok. Even dating now for young people are arranged mostly by apps where one’s profile picture becomes the most important, the only selection criteria to ‘swipe left or right’.

Even the best dressed man of 2013, as ranked by the Esquire magazine, was none other than Pope Francis. The same article also advised its readers that in order to gain respect, one must dress well. I recalled receiving exactly such an advise when I first started in ordained ministry. I am not going to get into a debate about dress-code today, but suffice to say that for me, dressing-well is a sign of respect for others, not for myself. (But hay, that’s just me.)

To a larger part of our society, image has become everything. But, let me put to you this question. What if, what if we are all blind but are unable to see our own blindness?

The Scriptural readings today, of John 9, focuses on the Gospel story of Jesus opening the sight of a man born blind. This somewhat long but well-crafted story, places us as sort of bystanders to multiple dialogues to what turns out to be multiple layers of blindness, physically, spiritually and theologically. Let's look at who are blind in this story.

First, **the disciples of Jesus were blind**. They were theologically blind when they saw the man born blind, sitting by the side of a road, near the Pool of Siloam, begging for a scrap of mercy. But instead of being provoked into act of charity, the disciples casually and cruelly asked Jesus, "Rabbi, Who sinned, this man or his parents?"

It is a pointless question as a man born blind could not have the opportunity to sin, unless one entertains an even more pointless argument of the possibility of committing sin while in a mother's womb. Attributing a person's disability to either prenatal or parental sin is equally pointless and cruel.

My older brother was born with a life-long debilitating disability. I was never quite sure as to the actual ailment that afflicted him. To the best of my understanding, it was something like a jaundice induced Cerebral palsy, that pretty much paralyzed him from birth, that continued to deform him through his thirty-three years of life on earth. In the Taiwanese society of the 60's and 70's thoroughly marinated in Buddhism and Taoism, a person born in such a condition was a bad karma, a debt that must be repaid, and a mark of shame that was bore largely by my mother, who had already endured previously nine miscarriages. Many times, Mom attempted suicide, to kill herself and even taking my brother with her. Thankfully, none succeeded.

The turning point for her (and for us as a family embarking on the journey of the Christian faith), was being introduced to a women's bible study group, where she read in John 9, the reply by Jesus, that "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." The relief she felt was unmatched by any, and the joy she felt from the words of Jesus empowered her forward. Hallelujah, praise be to God, for God's work was revealed through my brother, as Mom went on a life long evangelical spree, telling everyone she meets of how she was saved by the Good News of Jesus Christ. Even now I still meet people from Taiwan, whose lives were impacted by Mom's testimonial, in no small ways.

Coming back to this story in John 9, to the multiple layers of blindness. **The neighbours of this man born blind were themselves blind.** They could not even recognize the man after he sight was open by Jesus. “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am he.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?”

These neighbours had gotten used to the marginalized existence of the man born blind, and they could not comprehend what was happening, let alone acknowledge it, or accept it. They had taken sight as a privilege that belongs to them only. Sight, in a real sense, has blinded them to the reality of God, who lifts up the lowly, the humble, the poor, and the blind. God who turns the table, and invites all especially the marginalized to a seat at the table. The God who is absolutely worthy of our worship and of our praise.

**The religious leaders were blind also,** even though they patted each other on the back, and reassured themselves saying, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Instead of rejoicing over this healing of the man born blind, and truly giving glory to God, they got hung up over whether it is permitted to heal on the Sabbath or not.

There is this particular detail in the story that is truly fascinating. During the act of healing, Jesus took mud, spat on it, and applied it like a balm on the blindman’s eyes. Some biblical commentators have alluded this to how Adam was created by God with dirt in Genesis 2. Sure, there are similarity, particularly the mud part.

But in my view, now that’s truly my own opinion, I think Jesus was ‘trolling’ the Pharisees, that is intentionally triggering them. Allow me to explain. In the time of Jesus, there were two schools of Pharisees who were divided over healing on the Sabbath. The minority Hillel school permitted prayer for the sick on the Sabbath, but the majority Shammai school rejected such practice, but did not persecute the Hillelites for it. Both schools would certainly view the act of Jesus making mud with spit, as crossing the line of Sabbath observance.

The truth is Jesus could’ve heal by prayer, he could’ve heal by touch, or he could’ve heal by simply commanding it, which he had done in multiple other instances in other parts of the Gospel. In my opinion, Jesus made mud on the Sabbath, fully knowing the act would provoke both schools of Pharisees into a self-righteous religious frenzy. It is consistent with the prophecy of Isaiah, which Jesus had previously quoted in another context,

*“You will indeed listen but never understand, and you will indeed look but never perceive.”* (Isaiah 6:9, Mark 4:12) In a real sense, Jesus blinded the Pharisees, spiritually, while opening the sight of the man born blind.

Finally, let us focus on the man born blind whose sight was opened by Jesus. **The restoration of his physical sight was swift, but the opening of his spiritual sight took time.**

He was at first confused as to who opened his sight. He then defended the act itself courageously, in front of a religious inquisition, resulting in yet another form of being cast out, that is being driven out of the Synagogue. It wasn't until later when Jesus sought him out again and explained, did the man come to realize who it was who had opened his sight. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”, asked Jesus. The man answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped Jesus. It took time, it took patience. It is grounded out in the real life, but faith emerged eventually.

Let me conclude today's message with these words, by John Newton (1725-1807), who had a colourful past as a slave trader, who repented and turned to God, and lived out his redeemed life as a parish priest in a small village in England. His most notable contribution is this well known, and well loved hymn, Amazing Grace, which opens with these words: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”

Image isn't everything. Faith in the triune God is.

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**