

## **Homily – Learning How to See**

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Blinders are a piece of equipment or tack which are used with horses. If we were alive 120 years ago, many of us would have had horses at our homes and we would be familiar with blinders, but today most of us don't know what they are. Blinders are usually made from leather or plastic and they are placed on other side of a horse's eyes to keep them from seeing to the rear or sometimes to the sides. Blinders are used to keep a horse from getting distracted or startled by all the activity that is happening around them especially on a busy city street. I hope you can see that limiting the sightline of the horse can be very helpful and lead to greater safety. In this way blinders are a good thing. Today we are going to be looking at human blinders or more specifically being able to see.

Today's Gospel reading is another story of Jesus healing a blind man. Two chapters earlier in this Gospel according to Mark we had the first healing, and now we have the healing of Bartimaeus. We don't know how Jesus did it. Both of these healing stories are wonderful miracles. Today, in the twenty-first century we know that it is possible for the blind to see again, but in so many cases healing is still beyond us. Perhaps five hundred years from now we will have a much better understanding of these two healing miracles performed by Jesus. Maybe we will be able to help the blind see again.

One thing I want to point about these two miracles is that Jesus asked for permission, before helping them regain the use of their eyes. Often, we assume that a person wants to be healed, but perhaps the person is happy to keep their way of life. A miracle can upend a life, and it is actually rude to assume that a blind person is deficient in some way. Some people just want to stay as they are. In today's healing miracle the permission is quite explicit. As we heard, "Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." And, Jesus performed the miracle so that Bartimaeus could see. Today we continue to give thanks to God each time a person can see. In addition, I give thanks for all of our brothers and sisters who cannot see, and I give thanks for all of those in the medical profession who are able to perform miracles. Thank you God.

Now, the writer of this Gospel is doing more than showing us that Jesus performed miracles. In between the healing of the blind man in Chapter 8 and this healing in Chapter 10 are several stories about Jesus' disciples. These men and women who followed Jesus were often "blind" to what Jesus said and did. Today, we might say they were clueless, and we see Jesus getting frustrated with the disciples. Over and over again, they just miss the meaning of Jesus and his teachings, teachings that

would bring them into better alignment with God and the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is not going to be the expected warrior king. Instead, he is going to die. The followers of Jesus are not going to achieve earthly glory and riches. Instead, they are actually going to have to give away their riches. They are going to have to climb down the ladder of life to be equal to the poor and have the status of children. Jesus' followers are going to suffer and experience pain. They wanted him to confirm their desires, but instead Jesus tells his followers things that are much more complicated. Is it any wonder that the disciples were blind to these teachings of Jesus, teachings that were often the opposite of what they wanted and hoped. Maybe you are like me, but I'm not sure I want to see and understand all of these teachings of Jesus, for they have profound implications on the ways we lead our lives. This larger, complicated picture told by Jesus is scary. Like a horse, maybe we all have blinders on so that we can narrow our focus to see or discern only what we want to see. The metaphor of sight is so central to Jesus' teachings. He constantly taught about sight. He used seeing and blindness as metaphors for deep spiritual realities. And, the reality is that we do not see everything. So, we don't know everything. We do not even know how much we don't know, nor do we know how much of what we know is actually impartial, distorted, or false. That is why we seek to open our eyes, to encounter the world afresh in humility and in silent wonder. That is why we need to learn how to see afresh.

Today we are going to look at two biases that keep us from seeing God's kingdom that is already all around us. These are biases that keep us from unpacking the Christ that is already inside each and every one of us. I hope you have the desire to let go of biases. This is hard work and it will stretch and deepen your spiritual journey.

At their foundation, biases are a survival trait that human beings have adopted. We limit the amount of input we get and just look at what is most important for survival. One way to think of biases is that they act like a pinhole camera in which you only see a very small portion of the world, but with great clarity. Filters and sunglasses are two other ways to think about biases. Filters and sunglasses help us see but they also change the light. This is what biases do, they help us see and change what we see at the same time. They keep out certain things and let other things in. But, a strength is often a weakness, and biases come at a cost, especially when it comes to relationships. We miss out on the variety of relationships that we can have. Biases keep us from seeing how we fit into the larger scheme of things, and we miss out on so much of God's creation. We miss out on seeing the fullness, not only of other people, but also in ourselves.

I should point out that my understanding of biases has been most recently informed by a six episode podcast by Brian McLaren, called "Learning How to See." You can find the podcast at the website for the Center for Action and Contemplation. The

podcasts introduce thirteen biases that get in the way of our relationships with God, others, and self. However, instead of overwhelming you with that long list, I'm going to start with only two ways that we are all biased, and don't worry, I am also going to share spiritual practices that can reduce or minimize our biases.

The first bias is confirmation bias. With this bias, we easily accept information that confirms what we already think, and we easily reject information that unsettles our existing beliefs. Because of confirmation bias it is very important be aware of where we are paying attention. To whom do we pay attention? What are our news sources? Do we read articles when the title rubs us the wrong way, or do we skip those challenges to our existing beliefs? I think we are all aware of the social media bubbles and echo chambers that exist. Our responses to the last two presidential elections have been shaped by the Facebook algorithms that show us things that confirm rather than confront. But, even those who avoid social media are not immune to the hyperloop of just sinking in deeper and deeper into what we already believe. And, biases aren't logical. We can have nine pieces of data that say "A" is correct, but we will only see or believe the one piece of data that confirms our preconceived notion that "B" is correct. Science has shown that an unvaccinated person is eleven times more likely to die from Covid than a vaccinated person. However, since Colin Powell, who was fully vaccinated, died this past week, then that confirms the biases of those who reject vaccines. I should point out that Colin Powell was at higher risk because he had advanced Parkinson's and cancer, but confirmation biases will cause all of us to see what we want to see. Do you see the scientific research about the higher possibility of death for the unvaccinated, or do you see that even the vaccinated can die anyway. Which of your pre-existing beliefs have been validated.

So, what can we do about confirmation bias. First, it strikes me that a lot of people don't even know that confirmation bias exists. So, just knowing that it exists and reminding ourselves that we all have confirmation bias is a start. Next we must develop and nurture a desire for truth. We can't make confirmation bias go away. It is the way our brains evolved, but there are things we can do to strengthen our desire for the truth. Things that will maybe make us more vigilant about confirmation bias. And, the best way I know how to strengthen desire is through prayer. Put simply, prayer is the intentional strengthening of desire. And, here is a prayer from Brian McLaren's podcast. Please repeat each of these lines of prayer after me.

"Source of all truth,  
 help me to hunger for truth,  
 even if it upsets, modifies, or overturns  
 what I already think is true.  
 Guide me

into all the truth I can bear.  
 And stretch me to bear more,  
 so that I may always choose  
 the whole truth, even with disruption.  
 That I may choose the whole truth  
 over half truths with self-deception.  
 Grant me passion to follow wisdom  
 wherever it leads.  
 Thanks you God.

The second bias is complexity bias. This is the fact that our brains tend to prefer a simple lie to a complex truth. Part of this is about the way we listen. When something or someone is complex, we often stop listening. Or, sometimes we just choose what is easiest, or the most convenient, or the most simple so that we can minimize our effort and work. Or maybe complexity makes us feel incompetent. When we feel this way it is much better to go for something that makes us look good, even though it's not the whole truth, or even if it's a full lie. Complexity bias means we like headline slogans like "clean coal" or "cash for clunkers." There is joy in these simple catch phrases. Many of us lead busy, complex lives so that when we see a simple slogan we just head that direction. Complexity repels us, and simplicity attracts us. Again, complexity bias hits all of us such that we prefer a simple lie to a complex truth. Racism, white privilege, the environment, and global climate change are incredibly complex topics that can make us numb. But look at Jesus. He was always making his followers numb. Many of his teachings come across as simple. Love your neighbor. This is a simple saying, but the reality is quite complex. It is a lifetime of confronting the simplicity of who you think you know as your neighbor. Does your neighbor include the migrant from Guatemala? Your ex? The person on the other side of the divide? And then Jesus says love neighbor and love your enemy. Jesus jolts us out of our simplicity by contradicting what initially appear to be simple statements. Love your neighbor. Is it any surprise that the disciples of two thousand years ago did not see much of what Jesus was saying and doing? Is it any surprise that our biases make us miss out on the kingdom of God?

And, the first step to overcoming complexity bias is the same as for confirmation bias. We must know that it exists and remind ourselves that we all have complexity bias. And here is another prayer to help us build the desire to embrace complexity. Please repeat each line after me.

Spirit of wisdom and understanding.  
 Help me not be seduced by simple lies.  
 Or repelled by complex truths.  
 Instead, teach me to seek out understanding

as if it were a hidden treasure.  
Digging deep beneath surface appearances  
to discover what is real in the depths.  
Thank you God.

There is obviously a lot more that could be said about these first two obstacles to seeing, but I hope I've given you enough to help you observe biases in your daily life and to see how easily we can be led astray. We shouldn't become bias police, trying to take the confirmation or complexity splinters out of everyone else's eyes. We want to begin with ourselves. May you have the desire to take off the blinders and see the beauty that is already around you. And, God of glory help us to see with humility.