

Sermon 2026.03.15, Lent 4

“Spiritual Blindness: More Than Spots”

Gene McAfee

Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 15, 2026

John 9:1-41

Last Tuesday I was down at our UCC church in Tallmadge learning about something called *whole brain ministry*.

Our instructor explained that we tend to operate out of four different “quadrants” of thinking.

There’s the **rational** part of us that analyzes and likes facts and numbers.

There’s the **safekeeping** part that loves order and procedure—what we might call our Presbyterian self.

There’s the **feeling** part that is sensitive and compassionate.

And there’s the **experimental** part—the curious, imaginative, sometimes rule-bending part of us. Our UCC self.

And of course most of us like to believe we operate from *all four quadrants all the time*.

But if you’ve ever watched a church committee argue about the color of the carpet, you know that’s not always the case.

None of us operates from only one quadrant all the time. But most of us do have a dominant one. And the purpose of the seminar was to help us strengthen the parts of ourselves we use less.

Why?

Because the parts we use least . . . often become what we call **blind spots**.

And that matters for faith, because the Gospel suggests that the greatest danger in the spiritual life is not that we are wicked people.

It is that we are **unseeing people**—people who assume we see clearly when we do not.

Which brings us directly to this morning’s story from John.

The story of Jesus healing the man born blind—like the stories of Nicodemus and the woman at the well—is really about **people misunderstanding Jesus**. Some people see what God is doing in him. Others cannot see it at all.

In John’s Gospel this happens again and again. People hear Jesus talking about spiritual realities, but they interpret everything on a purely physical level.

Nicodemus hears Jesus talk about being born again and thinks about biological birth. The Samaritan woman hears Jesus talk about living water and thinks about literal water. And in John 9 we meet a man who is physically blind—and a group of religious authorities who turn out to be spiritually blind.

Before we go any further, though, we need to clear up a common misunderstanding.

Christians have often read stories like this as if they were about **Christians versus Jews**—as if the Jews didn't understand Jesus and Christians replaced them as God's chosen people.

That is a tragic misreading of the Gospel.

In Jesus' lifetime there were no Christians yet. Everyone in this story—Jesus, the blind man, the Pharisees—**is Jewish**.

What we are seeing in John's Gospel is an argument **within Judaism** about what faithfulness to God really means.

That matters, because Christians have too often used these texts to justify centuries of anti-Jewish prejudice and violence. Reading the Gospel faithfully means refusing that distortion.

But once we set that aside, we can see what the story is really about.

It's about **spiritual sight**.

And the irony of the story is that the only person who ends up truly seeing is the man who began the story blind.

The religious authorities, who assume they see clearly, turn out to be the ones who cannot see what God is doing.

And why can't they see it?

Because they have mistaken **human rules for divine reality**.

Jesus heals on the Sabbath, and they condemn him for it. But Jewish teaching—even before Jesus—recognized that relieving suffering takes precedence over Sabbath restrictions.

In other words, the law itself already contained the wisdom that **human flourishing matters more than rigid rule-keeping**.

Jesus is honoring that wisdom. But his critics cannot see it, because their commitment is no longer to the purpose of the law, but to the authority that comes from enforcing it.

And that, friends, is one of the deepest sources of **spiritual blindness**: when human systems, traditions, and assumptions become so powerful that we begin treating them as if they came directly from God.

We do this all the time.

We do it with **national identity**—“my country, right or wrong.”

We do it with **racial categories** that divide humanity into artificial hierarchies.

We do it with **binarisms** that insist the world must be either this or that instead of both and.

These are human constructions. They arise in particular moments of history for particular purposes.

But over time we begin to treat them as if they were woven into the fabric of creation itself.

And when that happens, we stop seeing clearly.

The Gospel calls that **blindness**.

Which brings us to another form of blindness that Christians struggle with: the way we talk about following Jesus.

These days you sometimes hear people say, “I’m not a Christian—I just follow Jesus.”

But if we are honest, almost none of us actually follows Jesus in the literal sense.

Jesus lived as a wandering teacher with no property.

He rejected violence.

He refused to organize his life around family, status, or wealth.

He dedicated himself entirely to calling people to repentance and announcing the reign of God.

Who among us lives like that?

Most of us do something quite different.

We take a **birthday-cake approach** to Christianity: a whole lot of cake that looks like ordinary middle-class life, with a thin icing of Jesus on top.

In other words, we take Jesus seriously—but not *that* seriously.

The hard parts of his teaching—nonviolence, radical trust in God, a life centered completely on the realm of God—we quietly set aside.

If we followed Jesus literally, most of us would have to explain to our financial advisors why we no longer need financial advisors.

And over time that becomes another kind of blindness.

We begin to assume that our way of life is normal, natural, even inevitable—when in fact the Gospel is always inviting us to see the world differently.

The saints and prophets throughout history have tried to live from that different vision.

People like Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa, Sister Helen Prejean, and many others.

Compared to the vast number of us who prefer a comfortable faith, the number of people who allow God to radically reshape their lives is very small.

Jesus himself warned about that.

“Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction,” he said, “and many enter through it.”

The path to life, he said, is narrower.

But the Gospel is not telling us this in order to shame us.

It tells us this because **God wants to heal our blindness.**

That healing is what Lent is about.

Lent is a season of repentance. And repentance simply means **turning again toward God**—allowing God to correct our vision.

The hymn “Amazing Grace” captures that perfectly:
“I once was blind, but now I see.”

John Newton wrote those words not because he tried harder than anyone else, but because God opened his eyes to the evil he had participated in as a slave trader.

Grace changed the way he saw the world.

And sometimes grace changes our vision in ways that are deeply humbling.

Many years ago, when I was a teaching assistant in graduate school, I had a student who seemed—at least to me—to be a mess.

She was late to class, late with assignments, and her exams were so rough that I eventually began grading them with the kind of deep sigh that only teachers know.

In the end the supervising professor and I decided to let her squeak through with one of the lowest grades we’d ever given a student.

And, if I’m honest, I hoped I would never see her in class again.

But two years later I did see her—for the first time.

I was sitting in the balcony of the university chapel for the baccalaureate service for her graduating class.

Partway through the service, that same student was called forward to lead the entire congregation in song.

And suddenly I learned something I had never known.

Before returning to school, she had spent decades teaching music in one of the most impoverished public schools in New York City. She had dedicated her life to bringing beauty and joy to children who had very little of either.

And she was magnificent.

Watching her lead that congregation, I realized how profoundly wrong I had been about her.

For two years I had reduced her to a struggling student.

I had never seen the person.

I had never imagined the gifts God had given her, or the ways she had used those gifts in the service of others.

Sitting there in that balcony, I felt deeply ashamed.

And I asked God for forgiveness—and for the grace never again to mistake my limited perspective for the whole truth about another human being.

That moment was, for me, a small healing of blindness.

And that is exactly what the Gospel invites for all of us.

As we move through Lent toward the cross and the empty tomb, God is inviting us to see more clearly—to see beyond our assumptions, beyond our habits, beyond the human systems we have mistaken for ultimate reality.

To see the world as God sees it.

To see our neighbors as God sees them.

And, perhaps most importantly, to see ourselves as God sees us.

Lent gives us forty days to practice that kind of seeing.

Forty days to repent.

Forty days to ask for the grace that can finally make us say, with gratitude and humility:

“I once was blind. But now, by the grace of God, I see.”

Amen.