

Mary Anderson  
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Scripture: Acts 9:10-19  
“Blind Spots”

In the scripture reading from the ninth chapter of Acts, we come upon Paul (still called Saul) of Tarsus shortly after his famous road to Damascus experience. As a mini refresher course, here are a few details of what had just transpired. According to scripture, Saul had been breathing murderous threats against the disciples of Jesus. He had applied for letters from the synogogue in Damascus authorizing him to arrest any men or women who were followers of the new way. While travelling on the road with other men, he was stopped in his tracks by a light from the sky that flashed all around him. Saul then fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ‘Tell me Lord, Saul said, ‘who you are.’ The voice answered, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But now get up and you will be told what you have to do.’ When Saul got up, he realized that he could no longer see and the men that he was travelling with led him by the hand into Damascus. He was blind for three days and took no food or drink.

It is at this point that our scripture reading begins. Ananias, a disciple of Jesus, was told in a vision by Jesus to go to Straight Street to the house of Judas and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He told Ananias that he would find him in prayer. Ananias was told that Saul had had a vision telling him that Ananias would come to lay hands on him and heal his blindness. At this point, Ananias voices concern to Jesus because he has heard of Saul and his murderous threats. Jesus then reassures him that this man from Tarsus is going to be his instrument to bring his name before nations and their kings and the people of Israel.

So Ananias, in an incredible act of bravery, enters the house where Saul is staying and immediately lays hands on the man most feared by the disciples of Jesus. And as if this isn’t enough, Ananias calls Saul ‘brother’. Saul regains his sight and is filled with the Holy Spirit. There is so much to this story, but the detail that jumped out at me several years ago and continues to fascinate me today is the following: “Immediately it was as if scales had fallen from his eyes and he regained his sight.” “It was as if scales had fallen

from his eyes” ?? He then got up, was baptized, and after he had eaten, he regained his strength.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible says: “And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. It seems to be only his eyes that were affected. The healing that he received healed and changed his ability to “see”. Judging from the accomplishments in the years that followed this miraculous healing. Paul was able to see farther than he had before. He was able to see beyond his own people – to people that he had formerly believed to be unworthy of God’s love. I think that the danger in reading this story from a Christian perspective is that we might have a tendency to remove ourselves from the drama. We might only see this as a conversion story from Judaism to Christianity, when in reality, I believe that it is a universal story of man’s contact with the spirit of the Christ.

This is a vivid description of a four day period in the life of probably one of the most influential disciples of Jesus that the world has ever known. After the scales fell from his eyes, he then proceeds to travel thousands of miles to Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, Crete and Rome bringing the Gospel message, first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. He establishes several churches often in the face of danger until he is finally taken as a prisoner to Rome. He writes letters of encouragement and support that now comprise close to half of the New Testament. I, like millions before me and long after I am gone, have been and will continue to be, in awe of Paul. Along with Paul’s encounter with Jesus, his healing and baptism, I believe that it was necessary for the scales to fall from his eyes before he was able to see clearly. Back to the scales in a minute.

We all carry scales that keep us from seeing clearly, or at least I do. It is part of our human predicament. Last winter, in a class on the four Gospels that I took at Fuller Theological Seminary, we read a book by Kelly Brown Douglas called The Black Christ. In one chapter, she discusses the contradiction between Christianity and the cruelty of slavery. Proslavery evangelists argued that because the New Testament Gospels did not speak for or against slavery, what was in the Old Testament was “authoritative in the Christian era unless it was abrogated in the New Testament.” In other words, since the New Testament did not speak directly about slavery, it supported it. The ministers veered

away from discussion of the four Gospels in their sermons hence bypassing Jesus' liberating ministry to the oppressed as well as his commitment to "set the captives free". Apologists for slavery said that if Jesus has considered slavery a sin, he would have spoken directly against it. This is scary manipulation of scripture. After reading The Black Christ, I began to think about potential "blind spots" in this generation. The word "arrogance" kept popping into my mind. The opposite of arrogance is humility – a word that seems to be lost from our contemporary vernacular.

Paul now believed that Christ was the end of the law. Karl Barth, a twentieth century theologian, believed that Christ is the end of religion (which may be accepted or refused according to our understanding of the emphasis word "religion"). In Barth's book, The Epistle to the Romans published in 1933 he says: "the perception which moves outwards from God cannot have free course until the arrogance of religion be done away." Paul experienced in Jesus, the Christ that has been here since the beginning that is beyond our minds ability to comprehend. It is only through humility, not arrogance that we have access to the Spirit. We are justified by faith and it is through obedience that we grow closer to God. There is nothing that we can do to be right. Only God is right.

For some reason, over the last few years, I have been humbled over and over, before God, by my own arrogance. I feel like Ebenezer Scrooge must have felt as he toured his life of stinginess, only in my case, it is arrogance. I attend a seminary that is labeled "liberal evangelical". They embrace the teachings of the world with Christ at the core.

I arrived with an attitude of "having a handle" on several aspects regarding Christian theology, placing words above the "fruit" that they bare. I have been humbled, brought to my knees if you will, by the gentleness, grace and wisdom of my professors and fellow students that don't always have exactly the same take on certain aspects of scripture that I have. In 2 Corinthians Chapter 3. Paul says to the people of Corinth: "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ

toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us (note the importance of humility); our competence is from God, who has made us ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

The area in which I have been the most humbled lately is on our mission trips. Many of you, by now, are familiar with Daniel and Heidi’s story in La Mision, Baja California. As a newly wed couple, they felt God’s call to built a free of cost daycare center ministering to low income families in the area. After beginning this vision last spring with a dollar, they now, with the help of numerous groups, have opened a daycare center that loves and nurtures 13 children five days a week while their parents are now able to work to support them. As a group, we went down to Baja thinking that we were ministering to the less fortunate. As it turns out, we are the ones that have received the blessing. Many of us have been humbled in the presence of Heidi and Daniel’s faith. I was warned a few years ago by a youth minister in Manhattan Beach that the theology in La Mision is a little different than our UCC kids are used to. “But”, he said, “we don’t worry about that.” It is true that the people that we have met in Mexico have a tendency to talk more openly about Jesus and their trust in God, but, for my part, I have found that I am moving closer to their “camp” than they to mine.

My personal “blind spots” often have to do with doubting God’s power to perform miracles. My own “sight” is so limited and my scales have many layers, like that of an artichoke that takes layers of peeling away until you reach the heart. During our winter youth mission trip to Los Angeles led by a group called the Center for Student Mission, an organization that ministers to the homeless in urban cities in the United States, we met a man named Walter that none of us will quickly forget. After our teenagers got up in the dark to prepare breakfast for 700 homeless people at the Midnight Rescue Mission, Walter came up to our group to give us a tour of the facility. He was a handsome African American man, possibly in his early forties, dressed in a new bright yellow sweatshirt, new tennis shoes and black sweat pants. As Walter spoke, I remember thinking that Walter should really be a preacher. He told us about the importance of making deposits in God’s bank. We all listened attentively. At the end of the tour, I asked Walter how he got such “a heart” for this work. Walter stopped, his demeanor shifted to

one of humility, and he raised his sleeve to show us multiple scars from an attempted suicide. Walter said, "I have been shot, stabbed, unconscious for 10 days, in jail, addicted to drugs and homeless." His answer was so clear, that there was no need for a response. We only knew Walter for about an hour, but he remains in our hearts. We ran into Walter as we entered the garage to leave. Big hugs were exchanged all around. After hearing Walter's story, I thought that his hardships must have happened many years ago, but Ben, our guide, told us that Walter only came to the shelter and rehabilitation center 6 months ago. After the first four days, the counselors noticed Walter's leadership abilities and gave him some responsibilities. The drug addiction ward is upstairs at the Midnight Rescue Mission. After 28 days, the participants in the program move to a different floor. Walter, however, chooses to remain with the incoming drug addicts to stay close to the source of his addiction and to be of service and support. Walter, his courage and God's ability to fully rehabilitate, humbled us all. For our part, we have new eyes to see the potential in the drug addicted and homeless. In our small encounter, God let us borrow his lenses for a few moments to see how He views Walter.

What if it was arrogance that fell like scales from Paul's eyes at its place, he received humility? I began to test it. Humility was not a virtue in the Hellenistic world. It was a despised quality in the ancient world generally. The term 'to humble' meant to humiliate – similar to menial, grovelling, dirt and filth. Perhaps they lost it somewhere along the line as our generation appears to have lost it today. Jesus knew of the importance of humility from his Jewish heritage. The importance of being humble before God in the Old Testament is mentioned in Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, 2 Samuel, 2 Chronicles, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Daniel and Zephaniah. In a vision, Daniel looked up to the sky and saw a man dressed in linen with a face like lightning. In verse 10:10, the man in the vision says: "Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet, for I have now been sent to you." So while he was speaking this word to me, I stood up trembling. He said to me, "Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words." From Proverbs 11:2 - "When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is to the humble." We know from the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus said: "Blessed are the

meeke, for they will inherit the earth. And to his disciples, in Matthew 18:1-4, he answered the disciples when they asked, 'who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' "He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

I was a child in the fifties and I don't remember any mention of humility in the discussion of virtues except for a few fairy tales. There are probably some of you that remember the importance of humility. By the time I began to absorb the information of my generation, the Russians had already launched Sputnik and we Americans began the race to be smarter than the Russians. Today our teenagers entering college are constantly reminded to be "all that they can be" as a self-contained entity and we wonder why loneliness is everywhere we turn. Over fifty years later, humility hasn't made an appearance on our modern radar screen. This church is the first place that I have experienced so many humble people in one place. I'm not talking about false humility, but rather, genuine humility before God and those around them. Our generation is not alone in our struggle with pride or arrogance versus humility. Mother Teresa said that her pride versus humility was her greatest challenge. Benjamin Franklin made a list of character qualities that he wanted to develop. He said that he was doing pretty well mastering one virtue at a time until he got to humility. He found that when he thought that he was making progress, he would become so pleased with himself that he would have to start all over again.

We are surrounded by people of our generation that suffer from what is referred to as "church burn". In other words, they have been hurt or "turned off" by a perhaps a lack of humility on the part of the church. I stopped going to church as a young adult because I wondered how God could love only a portion of His people. It didn't make sense to me. I think that many suffer from the same perception missing all of the good that comes from living in a community of faith. Almost everyone senses that Jesus has something different to say, but, for them, I believe, it is not worth the narrow vision that is required to join so many churches. Perhaps they are tired of so many people being "right".

The love and the power and the wisdom of the Spirit is immense, reaching far beyond our human ability to comprehend. God is BIG and we are small. No human or group of humans can claim ownership to the truth. So why study? Why bother if God is the one who holds all of the answers. Because by studying, we receive understanding. In our understanding, we discover that although God is BIG and we are small, we see that we are loved beyond measure – a love that will begin to drive us as it drove Paul. God wants to partner with us – a partnership of BIG and small. If we don't give Him any raw material, what does He have to work with? Without us, His stories that have been handed down from generation to generation for the last four thousand years will die. Do we want to be the generation that says, "Oh well..." More often than not, I need a large celestial mallet to beat down my will and arrogance. But in those moments when we know that we are truly nothing without God, our hearts are able to break open, vulnerable to trust in the Spirit, small and yet BIG in our Creator's eyes. And that's the daily miracle of life.

After the scales had fallen from Paul's eyes and his vision had cleared, how had his vision changed? In order to understand the answer, we need to pour over his letters in the New Testament. One thing is for certain - his vision had changed. Through his humility and obedience to the Spirit, he was able to share God's lenses more and more often. Enough from me. Let's hear from Paul. In Ephesians 3 verse 14 he says: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

For our final prayer, I find no greater words than in Paul's prayer to the people of Ephesus in Ephesians 3:14-21. It is the passage that best describes how far Paul can now "see". Let us join in his prayer. "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Holy Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all

the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

