

# *The Scourge of Presbyopia*

A Sermon Preached by  
Jeffrey W. Gibelius, Pastor  
Second Presbyterian Church,  
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

August 29, 2010

There's no easy way to say this: I recently learned that I have something called *Presbyopia*. I don't know what Presbyterians did to get a *disease* named after them, but I'm told that people of all denominations can get it. If you're 40 or above you might have it, too. *Presbyopia* is the Greek medical term for "your arms are getting too short for you to be able to read the newspaper."

I'm managing. Kari and I have two foster daughters living with us, one just a few months old, named, "Allie." Like all newborns, when we first got her she couldn't focus on things more than about 10 inches away. Even with my glasses I can't focus on anything *less* than ten inches away. Most people rock babies side to side. Until I get my new glasses we're going to be spending a lot of time zooming in and out so we can both see each other. It's not ideal, but it could be worse. At least we both have our vision, one developing and one correctable.

My multiple trips to the eye doctor have gotten me thinking about how precious vision is and about Jesus and his relationship with blind people. He really had a heart for them. There are 5 separate stories of Jesus healing 7 different blind people, more than for any other particular disease or disability. He probably healed many, many, more blind people. Today's Gospel lesson is an account of one of those healing miracles:

*Some people brought a blind man to [Jesus] and begged [Jesus] to touch him. {23} He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" {24} And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." {25} Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.*

*Mark 8:22-25 NRSV*

Doesn't it sound a bit like a modern trip to the eye doctor? "Try these on and tell me what you see." "People look like trees walking around?" "Sounds like someone is ready for bi-focals..."

Vision is a big deal to Jesus. When he's not healing people of physical blindness, he's telling blind people that one day they will see, or he's accusing the Pharisees of being truly blind. If we were to look at all the passages that mention blindness in the New Testament we'd find that they fit into three categories. If you're anything like me, you fit into a least one of them: each of us is blind in some way. *And each of us can be healed.*

Some of us here this morning are physically blind, or your doctors have told you that you are on your way toward legal blindness. I know of at least four people – of all ages -- in our Second Family who are legally blind, and I know of several others whose vision is seriously threatened. Few diagnoses are as scary. Most of us can't imagine life without the ability to see clearly.

In Jesus' day physical blindness was *truly* life threatening. There were no social support systems except the extended family. No special training or aid programs. And of course, no surgical procedures or corrective lenses. To make things worse, blindness was assumed to be a punishment for a sin – either that person's sin or a parent's sin. Blind people were pushed to the very edges of life – scorned by "respectable" people, unable to earn a living or provide for themselves, totally dependent upon the pity of others.

In modern times blindness isn't anything like the kind of barrier it once was. Computer technology has made a huge difference. But even more important have been changing attitudes about blindness. It turns out that the biggest obstacles to the progress of blind people were in the *minds* of the blind, not in their *eyes*.

If we were suddenly struck blind most of us would hesitate to take a single step out of our houses. But In 1990 Bill Irwin, aged 50 at the time and legally blind, hiked the entire 2,144 miles of the Appalachian Trail. Since that time many blind people have followed in his footsteps.

In 2000, in Sydney, Australia, Maria Runyon, an American, became the first blind runner to compete in an able-bodied Olympic games, placing 8<sup>th</sup> in the 1500 meters, ahead of every other American in the race.

A year later Eric Weihenmayer stood on top of the world, becoming the first blind person to scale Mount Everest. A reporter asked him why he chose to attempt such a dangerous feat. He replied, “Someone once told me that blind people need to realize their limitations. . . . I think it is much more exciting to realize my potential.”

Today there are blind governors, blind CEOs, blind doctors, and blind pastors. If physical *blindness* isn't the barrier it used to be, what's *our* excuse for not pursuing ambitious goals, following our dreams, and answering God's call?

Despite all the progress, some ancient attitudes about blindness still persist. We no longer believe that sin causes it, but we still think that blindness somehow changes the character of a person. Movies almost always portray blind people as gentle, calm, loving, and wise beyond their years. This, of course, may describe some blind people; some blind people surely do have hearts of gold. But it's just as likely that blindness strikes some people who are – or who may become -- angry, vengeful, mean, and cranky. *Blindness* doesn't turn a jerk into a good person or vice versa; *decisions* do. Disabilities strike all temperaments equally, and we all have choices about how we will deal with whatever challenges we face.

What people with disabilities want more than *sympathy* is *acceptance*. They want to be treated like everyone else. No better and no worse. When it comes to making costly building accommodations or offering help to another person it's helpful to ask, “How would I want to be treated if I were in that situation?” And if that doesn't work, ask, “How would I want my son or daughter or mother to be treated.” The Golden Rule is a great guide; it puts us in the blind person's shoes.

Johnson and Johnson sponsored a training program for geriatric nurses to help them understand what it was like to have very poor vision. They took clear plastic glasses, smeared the lenses with Vaseline and told the nurses to wear them all day. It was only a matter of seconds before the nurses discovered how hard it was to read the hospital signage, instructions on a bottle of pills, or a basic recipe. That experience revolutionized the

way the nurses cared for their patients, because they had had a taste of what it was like to be visually impaired.

We don't know why Jesus doesn't miraculously heal all blind people today, but Christian missionaries are continuing his healing ministry. Some of our best work is being done in areas of the world where blindness is caused by polluted water and therefore *completely* preventable. And our own Presbyterian Church (USA) general mission dollars support the Siloam Eye Center, providing poor people in South Korea with eye surgery, Braille Bibles, and life-enhancing equipment. And Second Pres doctors like Stephen Partridge and Bob Thompson have devoted their professional careers to helping people see more clearly.

Jesus said that along with the preaching of Good News to the poor, and release to the captives, one of the signs of the coming reign of God is "the recovery of sight to the blind." (Matthew 11:5; Revelation 3:17; Romans 2:19) Jesus sometimes used blindness as a metaphor for those conditions in life that hold us back, limit our freedom, or cause us to be dependent in ways that we don't want to be. I think our fear of blindness is really fear of having to be dependent on others to do things that we once were able to do for ourselves. These days many blind people live completely whole and nearly independent lives, but the metaphor is still helpful. Don't we all long for a day when whatever chains that bind us or whatever shields that blind us will be gone? Jesus promises that such a day will come.

In the meantime, all of us – no matter the quality of our vision – have to deal with the personal limitations that cause us to be dependent on others. In fact, our limitations, whatever they may be, are likely present by God's design. God made us so we'd need each other. I once heard someone describe humans as one-winged angels: we can fly only when we work together. So let's stop complaining that we only have one-wing or that our vision isn't what it used to be or that our memory is fading or that our energy is flagging – and look for ways to work together to make the most of our brief time on earth.

I was delivering Thanksgiving dinners to people in need in Schenectady, NY, several years ago. It was kind of like Meals on Wheels. One of our addresses was a really run down house on the edge of downtown. The wooden porch was rotting and falling apart. There was no bell on the

door. My sister and I just banged on the door as loudly as we could. No answer. We were about to leave when the door finally opened. Two elderly women greeted us. One standing, one in a wheelchair. It turns out that they were sisters. The one in the wheelchair couldn't walk. The one who was standing couldn't see. *Together* they were able to do everything they needed to do. Not only did they accept the food we brought, they invited us in, told us their story, and joined us in a prayer. I was struck by how even though they had much to complain about, they were full of joy and gratitude. Someday when we see Jesus face to face I don't think he'll be impressed with our excuses about why we didn't love or help people – he'll want to know how we worked together to make the most of whatever he gave us.

To the *physically* blind, God offers strength to overcome obstacles and make their blindness irrelevant.

To the *emotionally* blind and dependent, God offers strength and freedom – not freedom from people – but freedom for people -- freedom to be with them in mutually helpful ways that glorify God.

And to the *spiritually* blind, God offers ... some pretty harsh words. Jesus has nothing but hope and kindness for people who are blind and come to him for healing. What he can't stand are people who are blind and don't know it, especially a particular group of Pharisees. They had 20/20 vision but still they couldn't see. That's why he calls them "blind guides" and "blind fools." They need a guide, they need help, they need to have their eyes opened, they need Jesus -- but they don't see it.

Many of us suffer from various forms of spiritual blindness, too, don't we?

How many of us are blind to our own limitations? Every season of the television talent show American Idol reminds us that many people think a little too highly of their abilities. When we talk about blind people or people who use wheelchairs or people who are intellectually challenged in some way, it's awfully easy to be –at the same time -- blind to our own physical, emotional, and spiritual limitations. The truth is, we *all* need help. We *all* have challenges to be overcome. It's just that some disabilities and limitations are easier to see than others.

A sign of spiritual maturity is the ability to see ourselves accurately—as God does – no better and no worse. I’m not just talking about musical or athletic limitations. I’m talking about sin, too. Many of us are better at seeing the speck in someone else’s eye than we are at the log in our own eye. A great prayer would be, “Lord, help me to see my own sin – and your grace alongside it.”

How many of us are blind to our blessings? We live in one of the wealthiest countries on earth, with clean water, excellent healthcare, freedom to worship, and all kinds of opportunities and yet how many of us whine on a pretty regular basis—about the economy, about the government, about the weather. It’s as if we were all born with silver spoons in our mouths and we’ve been complaining about the tangy metallic taste ever since. By any measure, God has been very good to us. Other people can see it, why can’t we?

And how many of us are blind to God’s presence? We have a hard time seeing God, don’t we? It’s not because God isn’t there. A friend of mine was going through a really difficult time and she admitted, “I know God is always there, I just never stop to look.” [Shelly Iwahashi] This kind of vision takes work to develop. And we can’t achieve it on our own. In fact, John Calvin said we actually need glasses to see God at work in our lives. The Bible, he said, serves as the lens through which we can see reality in all its dimensions, including the spiritual. If we want to see God beside us we’re going to have to look through the lens of His Word.

*Spiritual* blindness is worse than any other kind, isn’t it? We can’t always see opportunities and potential. We can’t always see dangers and pitfalls. What good is sight if you can’t see potential, grace, and God standing right next to you? As Helen Keller once said, “The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.”

When I think of the accomplishments of some *physically* blind people – climbing Everest, competing in the Olympics, finishing the Appalachian Trail – and then consider what I’m *not* doing in my relatively able-bodied condition, I can see who is really “disabled” and who truly needs God’s help.

*Presbyopia* can be corrected. Spiritual blindness can be treated, too. With prayer, study, patience, and persistence. With God’s help we can come

to see the world the way Jesus did – to see goodness in all people, to see hope in every situation, to see our Heavenly Father beside us at all times. Amen.

*Dear Friend,*

*I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at [www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons](http://www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons)*

*Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.*

*Jeff Gibelius, Pastor*

**Second Presbyterian Church**  
528 Garland Dr.  
Carlisle, PA 17013  
[www.GrowWithSecond.org](http://www.GrowWithSecond.org)  
717-243-4571

© 2010 Jeffrey Gibelius

This sermon is intended for personal use and distribution. If you want to use it for anything else, I'd be honored. Just call for permission. No claims of absolute originality are made for this material. As one man said, "I churn my own butter, but I use milk from other men's cows."