



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Ephesians 4:1-6 &

St. Luke 14:1-11

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I want to talk about three things this morning that come out of our Gospel and our Epistle: blind spots, humility, and unity. First blind spots. We've all got them. We have our eyes so focused on one thing that we miss other things. Sometimes we know that those other things are there, but we just don't give them any thought—maybe they just don't seem as important as the things we're focused on. Sometimes we're missing something because we're just plain ignorant—we have no idea what we're blind to.

Friday I was driving home from the Aquatic Centre and as I turned into our cul-de-sac I was suddenly confronted by a bicyclist who was riding on the wrong side of the road, headed straight towards me, swerving around, and not paying attention. I slowed down. My focus was on him as I started thinking about swerving to the other side of the road to pass him. And while I was focused on him, I almost hit his dog. That's why he wasn't paying attention. His dog was off-leash and running through the yards across the street and he was trying to call the dog back to himself. All of us had blind spots. I was so focused on not hitting the cyclist that I was blind to the dog suddenly running in front of me. The cyclist was so focused on his out-of-control dog that he was blind to the car—to me—headed straight towards him. And the dog, well, the dog was just plain blind to everything that really mattered.

Brothers and sisters, every one of us is just like that as we make our way through the Christian life. Some of us may have our eyes wide open and are blind only to some relatively small things. Some of us follow Jesus with tunnel vision on the one or two things that we think really matter and are oblivious to a whole host of vitally important things. And, some of us are like

that dog: we run from one thing to another, letting whatever is new and exciting catch our attention, while we're blind and oblivious to just about everything important. The danger of blind spots is that they keep us from growing in godliness.

The Pharisees had blind spots. They were zealous for the law, but they had tunnel vision for the law. Now, being zealous for the law isn't a bad thing in itself. The problem was that they were blind to the need for things like love and grace and humility. Because of their blind spots, the Pharisees followed a lot of rules, but they weren't particularly godly. Because they were so focused on the law, they had become prideful. In the Gospel St. Luke tells us that on one particular Saturday, presumably after Jesus had attended services at the local synagogue—maybe he'd even preached there—one of the rulers of the synagogue invited him home for Sabbath dinner. The text doesn't give us all the details, but I suspect that these rabbis—whom Luke tells us were Pharisees—knew full-well who Jesus was and had heard his teaching. Maybe Jesus had even been talking or preaching about grace in the service that morning. So this rabbi invited him home, and it's pretty obvious that he was setting a trap for Jesus. It also seems pretty obvious that Jesus knew exactly what he was walking in to. Look at Luke 14, beginning at verse 1:

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. [And now the setup:] And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy.

Dropsy is an old-fashioned name for oedema—a lymphatic problem that causes fluid to collect in various parts of the body. Presumably this man had an obviously bad case. Maybe he was one of the household servants or maybe he was a member of the synagogue, but whoever he was, this “ruler of the Pharisees” invited to Jesus to dinner and then made sure that Jesus wouldn't miss this obviously sick man. It was a setup. They knew that Jesus healed the sick. They also knew that according to the law you weren't supposed to do any work on the Sabbath. Jesus was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. If he did heal the man they'd be all over him for breaking the Sabbath, but if he didn't heal him, the Pharisees would

have been all over him for being compassionless.

But Jesus isn't stupid. He saw the setup and headed things off. Look at verses 3 to 6:

And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” [He calls them out on their trap.] But they remained silent. [What are they going to say? “Why yes, Jesus, we're devoted followers of God; we're good religious people who are zealous for the law, so we *deceptively* set a trap for you using this poor sick man as bait. We were really hoping you'd make us look like a bunch of self-righteous jerks.”] Then [Jesus] took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them, “Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?” And they could not reply to these things.

Again, what would they say to him? Jesus cuts right to the heart their hypocrisy. He knew—and they knew too—that if one of them had an ox that fell into a well on the Sabbath, they wouldn't hesitate to do the hard work of pulling it out. And yet here they take this man whom they knew had a serious illness and they care so little for him that they use him as a prop in this plot to trap Jesus. If they cared for this many with dropsy as much as they cared for their own farm animals, they'd have taken him straight to Jesus and asked that he be healed—regardless of what day of the week it was.

Jesus is showing them their blind spot. They were zealous for the law, but in their zeal for the rules and regulations and the raw *letter* of the law, there was a big blind spot in their vision when it came to the *spirit* of the law—to what the law was actually all about. What do we say every week in the Summary of the Law? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*” The point of the law wasn't just to keep a bunch of arbitrary rules that God gave through Moses. The rules were given to show us how to live in a way that is pleasing to God and to show us how to love our neighbours.

Brothers and sisters, you and I all have blind spots too. Some of us may be legalistic rule-keepers like the Pharisees. Some of us are blind to other things and have other problems. Whatever the blind spots, they hinder our growth in godliness. The point, though, is that they're *blind* spots—things we *can't* see. We need *someone* or *something* to show them to us. And that's why the Word of God is so important to us. In this case, it was the Word of God himself, incarnate in the person of Jesus, who pointed the blind spot out to these Pharisees. Today we have the Word of God *written* to open our eyes to our blind spots and to remove our spiritual cataracts. It's the same Word in a very real sense and that same Word still does the same thing. This is why it's so vitally important for us as Christians to be immersed in the Scriptures—to be reading and studying and meditating on and memorising the Word. If we don't we'll go on in our blindness. This is why it's also so vitally important for us to be walking in fellowship with other believers who are also immersed in the Word—so that we can exhort each other and show each other our blind spots.

But having the Word show us our blind spots isn't the end of the problem. It would be great if we all read our Bibles daily and simply acted on everything we read there. It would be great if we listened intently to every sermon we heard and if each one had a clear application of Scripture that we all simply put into practice. And it would be great, when we missed something in our own study or from the pulpit, if we all went around exhorting each other, lovingly point out each other's blind spots and if we each acted on those exhortations. But that's not what happens. We have an amazing ability to forget or ignore the things we read in our Bibles. We do the same with sermons—or, sadly, when confronted from the pulpit some of us will simply choose to leave and go to a church where our blind spots aren't confronted. And sometimes it seems, more often than not, that no matter how lovingly a brother or sister tries to show us our blind spots, we're more inclined to get angry about it than to accept their exhortation. We've all got something (or *some things*) that we're blind too: maybe you've got a temper, maybe you gossip, maybe you're unforgiving or you coddle your bitterness,

maybe you live in anxiety, or you're judgemental, unthankful, jealous, or selfish. But it's because of *pride* that we refuse to change. To change you have to admit that you've been wrong, that you've made a mistake, that you're a sinner.

Look again at Luke's Gospel. Jesus couldn't have made it any clearer to the Pharisees that they had a gigantic blind spot. But their legalism and lack of love wasn't their only blind spot. They were prideful too and that pride was a huge obstacle for their admitting to the blind spot of legalism.

Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus talks about a wedding feast in his parable, but what he's getting at is far more important than a wedding feast. The Jews—and especially the Pharisees—looked forward to that day when they would "sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11). These proud men who were zealous for the law expected that their place in God's kingdom would be at the head table, right there with the patriarchs—with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and when it came to earthly feasts in the meantime, they were happy in their pride to take that same place of prestige here and now. They exalted themselves on earth because they were sure that God would exalt them in his eternal kingdom—that God favoured them because they were favourable.

Men with that kind of pride aren't very teachable. If you point out their blind spots, they're going at best to ignore you and at worst they'll get angry with you.

Jesus was crucified for it. And so he shows them their pride and he gives them a stern warning. If you want to be exalted by God in his kingdom, you've got to lower yourself here on earth—you have to be humble. He told his own disciples, "If anyone would be first, he must be *last of all and servant of all*" (Mark 9:35).

Think about that in terms of the Gospel. What's the single greatest obstacle to the Gospel? It's pride. The Gospel tells us that we are sinners, that we're deserving of eternal death, that there's absolutely nothing we can do to help ourselves or to earn or work our way out of that condemnation. The Gospel tells us that God has done it for us and that Jesus took our sins on himself and then died in our place on the cross. The Gospel goes even further: It's not just that we can't redeem ourselves. We can't even overcome sin by ourselves. We can only be victors over sin if we accept that Jesus conquered sin when he rose from the grave. He saves us from the consequences of our sins. He saves us from our actual sins. For our part, we can do *nothing* but have faith and trust in him to do it for us. If you're full of pride, the Gospel is a hard pill to swallow, because pride doesn't want to admit it needs help and it doesn't want to admit that it can't accomplish something or take care of itself.

Jesus' point in the parable is that if you want to be exalted by God—if you want to one day sit in his kingdom at his feast—pride in your works won't get you there. You've got to be humble enough to admit your unworthiness. *Humility is the first step into the Christian life and into the kingdom of God.* Think of Jesus' parables and ask yourself who goes home redeemed and justified in the end. Here it's the one who humbled himself and took the lowest seat at the great feast. In another parable it's the tax collector who humbled himself and knelt at the back of the temple to ask God's forgiveness. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, it was the young man who humbled himself before his father and said, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." In another it's the one who finds himself in heaven on the last day and says with surprise, "Lord, when did I see you hungry, thirsty, or sick and ministered to you?" as if he had no idea that he had ever done any good that was worthy of being rewarded.

Again, *humility is the first step into the Christian life and into the kingdom of God*. But friends, humility doesn't stop when we become Christians. We're all guilty here, but it still never ceases to amaze me how we can be humble before our almighty God—we can humble ourselves and accept his pardon like the servant Jesus tells us about who humbly accepted his master's pardoning of his ten thousand talent debt. And yet we find it so hard to humble ourselves when it comes to other people. That same servant who was forgiven so much promptly had his buddy thrown into prison because he couldn't pay back a relatively small loan. Shouldn't forgiveness trickle down? Should humility do the same thing?

We admit we're sinners before God, but promptly become pridefully angry when a brother or sister points out our sin. God has shown us love so amazing that we can't even fathom its full depth, and yet we can be so unloving to our brothers and sisters, we scorn or forsake God's Church, we cause dissensions and divisions. God has forgiven us, but we get bitter and angry and refuse to forgive others. Our eyes are full of blind spots. We lack humility. And the end result is that the Church—the Body of Christ—is not what it should be. It's lame and fractured, its light is dim, and it's often ineffective at its mission to glorify God and show his Gospel to the world.

If we would only remember that humility is the key to the kingdom of God, we can be sure that the Church would look very different. Let me close with our Epistle, Ephesians 4:1-6.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord [consider St. Paul's example of humility—his willingness to be a martyr for the Gospel.], **urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all *humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.***

Consider that list of blind spots that cripple the body of Christ and look at how

humility overcomes them. Instead of looking out for ourselves, Paul reminds us to live in humility and gentleness with each other. Instead of getting angry, instead of being impatient, instead of causing dissensions he calls us, in humility, to bear with each other. The fact is that we are *one* in Christ Jesus and we should be *eager* to maintain that unity and display it to the world. As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, ask yourself: Am I exalting myself, or am I living in humility and letting God exalt me? Am I living in humility and letting the Word reveal my blind spots so that I can grow in godliness? Am I living humbly not only before God, but before my brothers and sisters? Am I eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? Am I ready to patiently and forgivingly bear with the imperfections of my brothers and sisters that we all might exhort each other to greater godliness?

Let us pray: Father, we asked earlier this morning in the Collect for you to uphold and encourage us by your grace that we would be continually given to all good works. We ask now that by your grace you would break our pride and show us how we each fail in those good works. Grow us in godliness and in Christ-likeness, and as we grow in humility and grace, we ask that you would strengthen our unity and our witness of the Gospel's power. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.