

**“With eyes to see the face of love”, a sermon based on John 9:1-41
preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin on 26 March 2017.**

When we finally get to Good Friday and the man hanging on the cross, will we have the eyes to see the face of love? How do we get those eyes?

Amid bombs and threats, amid hateful statements and stereotyping, amid the tragedies of Mosul and South Sudan, can we recognise love when it appears?

It's a question to ask as we journey through Lent to Easter, because at Easter the face of love is decisively disclosed.

Will we recognise it?

The story today begins with physical blindness.

A man born blind. Jesus spits on the ground and makes mud with saliva. He spreads the mud on the man's eyes. Go wash in the pool of Siloam, he says. The man went and washed and came back able to see.

Jesus leaves the story and we then spend most time with people who struggle to see the man.

Neighbours and those who had seen the man before as a blind beggar cannot now see him as a sighted man.

And the Pharisees, because it happened on the Sabbath when it was illegal to be healed, and because the man was a sinner, they cannot see him either.

At the end of the story, Jesus reappears and says - “I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.”

So people who physically may be blind can see and those who can physically see may be blind.

There are many ways of framing the story, but I want to frame it as about seeing love, and especially about seeing love in the man on the cross.

The healing love we see at the beginning of the passage is not love from a distance.

It's tactile and close and physical and touching.

When I was a child I got mumps. I have vague memories of discomfort and pain. My most powerful memory though is of being home from school, with my mum. Of her caring for me, and of us sitting in the sun on our front porch, and of her running her hands through my hair. I feel it still.

Last week I was not feeling well. On Tuesday I pray with the local Catholic priest. He had just been to the hospital, and so he offered to anoint me. It had the beautiful smell of lavender and on the back of my hands and on my forehead he anointed me with oil and prayed for me. I was overwhelmed.

Touch has the power to open our eyes to the face of love.

Of course, we also know how easy touch can hurt and harm.

We have become rightly cautious about whether we can trust people to touch us.

And we can be starved of touch.

I have told this story before, of a person attending worship at Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco, and of how through embrace during the embrace of someone the visitor did not want to embrace, his world opened out to live more justly and inclusively.

How do we come to see the face of love?

In her book *Learning to walk in the dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of Jacques Lusseyran, a blind French resistance fighter who wrote about his experience in a memoir called *And There Was Light*.

Lusseyran had poor eyesight and wore glasses. At the age of seven, one day at school he fell against his teacher's desk, punctured both eyes and became completely and permanently blind.

He wrote about the experience. He learned from the reactions of those around him what a total disaster this was. In those days blind people were swept to the margins of society. His doctors suggested sending him to a school for the blind but his parents refused. His mother learned Braille with him. The principal of his school ordered a special desk for him that was large enough to hold his extra equipment. But the best thing his parents did for him was never to pity him. They never described him as “unfortunate.” Soon after his accident his father, said, “Always tell us when you discover something.”

Lusseyran learned that he was not a poor blind boy but the discoverer of a new world in which the light outside of him moved inside to show him things he might never have found any other way. Barely ten days after his accident he made a discovery that entranced him for the rest of his life. “The only way I can describe that experience is in clear and direct words,” he wrote. “I had completely lost the sight of my eyes; I could not see the light of the world anymore. Yet the light was still there.”

“Its source was not obliterated. I felt it gushing forth every moment and brimming over; I felt how it wanted to spread out over the world. I had only to receive it. It was unavoidably there. It was all there, and I found again its movements and shades, that is, its colours, which I had loved so passionately a few weeks before.

“This was something entirely new, you understand, all the more so since it contradicted everything that those who have eyes believe. The source of light is not in the outer world. The light dwells where life also dwells: within ourselves. (*Against the Pollution of the I*)”

With practice, he learned to attend so carefully to the world around him that he confounded his friends by describing things he could not see. He could tell trees apart by the sounds of their shadows. He could tell how tall or wide a wall was by the pressure it exerted on his body.

The problem with seeing the regular way, Lusseyran wrote, is that sight naturally prefers outer appearances. It attends to the surface of things, which makes it an essentially superficial sense. We let our eyes skid over trees, furniture, traffic, faces, too often mistaking sight for perception—

which is easy to do when our eyes work so well to help us orient ourselves in space.

Speed is another problem. Our eyes glide so quickly over things that we do not properly attend to them. Fingers do not glide, Lusseyran points out. To feel a table is a much more intimate activity than seeing it.

One of his greatest discoveries was how the light he saw changed with his inner condition. When he was sad or afraid the light decreased at once. Sometimes it went out altogether, leaving him deeply and truly blind. When he was joyful and attentive it returned as strong as ever. He learned very quickly that the best way to see the inner light and remain in its presence was to love.

In January of 1944 the Nazis captured Lusseyran and shipped him to Buchenwald along with 2,000 of his countrymen. There he learned how hate worked against him, not only darkening his world but making it smaller as well. When he let himself become consumed with anger he started running into things, slamming into walls and tripping over furniture. When he called himself back to attention, however, the space both inside and outside of him opened up so that he found his way and moved with ease again. The most valuable thing he learned was that no one could turn out the light inside him without his consent. Even when he lost track of it for a while he knew where he could find it again.

Let Christ take hold of our lives so we can see the face of love, the true light. That is the seeing which enables us truly to live.

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