

“Good News of Shepherd’s Table” by Jacki Coyle

March 2, 2008



I am so very grateful for the invitation to join you in worship this morning and to reflect with you on today’s scripture. It is particularly good to be able to share the good news of Shepherd’s Table and to thank you for the gift of your partnership.

The story of the man born blind is one of my favorite scripture stories and one that challenges me both in my personal life and my ministry with Shepherd’s Table.

Throughout the last few weeks I have been reflecting about

this story, taking mental notes in preparation for putting the words on paper. The events of the past week changed the focus of the sermon.

I had an MRI performed Friday. The tech asked if I needed a blind fold in order to keep my eyes shut and the light out. I quickly said no. I thought to myself, "I know how it is to be in the dark, to shut out the light, to be spiritually blind and to have little or no sight."

I found myself lying on the MRI table and thinking about this reflection and how timely it was in my own life.

I am humbled to share a story of my own blindness with you and hopefully to offer to you the time to look into the eyes of your own heart and soul and to see the areas where you might be blind.

On Thursday I had a conversation with a former client of Shepherd's Table. We will call him John. John's life is a grand success story in many ways. He has held a steady, rewarding job for over 12 years. But as we began to talk on Thursday I knew there was a problem.

As the conversation began I thought about the enormous respect and admiration that many people have for John. What could be so hard now? Why the trouble?

He began to tell me his story and I quickly thought that I saw

what was happening. I thought I saw into his heart and knew what he was feeling and thinking and surely I could make a suggestion of what he might do now. I had John and the problem figured out.

How incredibly wrong I was. You see what I was blind to is the brokenness that remains so much a part of the fabric of his being. The brokenness that comes from a lack of any self esteem, from the anger built up over years and years of self doubt and self hatred. My meager attempts to bring clarity or understanding in this conversation were falling far short. The more we talked the more I knew that I was truly not getting it. My responses and my questions were met by his anger.

He screamed at me and said that I failed to see him and to know him. He said, "After all these years you do not know me at all." I could find no words to respond. Was I blind? Did I really not know him at all? He talked more about what I did not know about his life.

Toward the end of the conversation he screamed, "I hate myself every day. I cannot even look at myself without hating myself." John's scream was a visceral scream, one that came from the pit of his gut and the bottom of his soul.

There was a pregnant pause in the conversation. Something in me was changing. Ahhhh...My eyes were finally opened. It was as if Jesus had taken the mud, spit into it and rubbed it into my eyes and on my heart.

That very touch of Jesus, that intimate contact, that energy that penetrated me, came through John's soulful, painful revelation. It was for me the same intimate contact, the same healing that the man born blind must have experienced. Was it that I, like the man born blind, was in the right place at the right time to be healed?

I was made to see in ways that I had never seen before. I saw the cost, heard the cost, felt the cost to John of being a "sober drunk" as he would say. In one moment, in one conversation, my blindness was removed.

I sat across from John. I could not utter a word. My blood was pulsing through my body and the tears rested right at the edge of my eye lids. I looked at John and said, "I love you"...no words to try and talk him into loving himself...no words to resolve the problem, simply one soul trying mightily to connect to another. It was not enough but it was all that I had to give.

John didn't hear my words. He left in an angry rage. It would be several hours later until he returned and apologized for his anger. I said, "I forgive you." No more words spoken. We simply hugged. The connection was complete.

There will be opportunities in the days ahead to sit together, to talk and to walk with him in his brokenness to healing and to light. There will be opportunities for me to thank him for healing my blindness. You see it was his vulnerability, his moment to express the truth of his life that opened my eyes.

John and I both yearn for the healing touch of Christ, to be freed from blindness. I suspect that is true of all of us. No matter what our blindness, it is that individual and collective desire to walk in the light that keeps us connected in this journey.

In reflecting on the scripture, I am so aware that the man healed of his blindness was able to confront the Pharisees, to challenge them, to speak the truth to them. He was able to humble himself before Christ and to claim his belief in the Lord.

I can only trust that I may be like the blind man in today's Gospel story. I trust that my actions, my strength of character, my courage will be reflected in a life lived with eye wide open and a heart continually ready to be healed and ready to be given to others.

My vision and understanding of John and of the hundreds of clients of ST who live in the midst of an addiction is profoundly changed. Now I will see the people differently, see their anger differently, see their pain differently. It is not simply about their addiction, not about what they were born with or the decisions they have made in their lives. It is about the brokenness, the self doubt and the self hatred. It is walking with them as they move through and beyond the anger and the darkness, into the love that will heal all blindness and all brokenness.

Our sisters and brothers whose spirits and bodies are broken and in need come to Shepherd's Table every day. We serve a

dinner meal every night, doing this with absolute faithfulness for 25 years. We offer direction and encouragement, information and referral to services. We provide prescription assistance and medical care when people are sick. We offer clothing not only to make sure that folks have a shirt on their back, but that they may lift their heads high and walk with dignity. We provide free eye exams and eye glasses so that people can indeed see again; see life with clarity and hopefully the future with new promise and possibility. We welcome people. We do all that we can to lift people up, to be instruments of healing, to offer hope, to inspire courage for their journey.

It is certainly my hope that those who come as clients, those who come as dinner guests, are coming at the right time, to the right place to receive what they need. We are faithful in our mission because of you and folks just like you who sacrifice and who give so generously of time, service, in-kind gifts and financial support. Our brothers and sisters trust that the faithfulness born out for 25 years will continue into the future.

As I trust that you can see from the story I shared, John still needs us. Many who suffer the debilitating pain that comes from addiction and mental illness still need us. Many who have no home still need us. Many with physical illnesses and no way to access medical care still need us. Many who need direction still need us.

I also would humbly add that those of us who serve as staff, as volunteers, as donors need the healing power that absolutely comes when we share our own lives, our own brokenness with others. It is in serving that we are made

whole, that we are healed, even in moments when we least expect it.

I wonder for you, where is your own blindness? Who will you be with, sit with, be vulnerable with, so that your eyes might be opened and your heart filled with light? When will you simply be in the right place at the right time, unaware, that the healing power of Christ is coming into your life?

Perhaps the good news is we don't know that answer. But we know that if we live with expectation and openness our hearts will be ready, our spirits open, our bodies receptive to the powerful, healing intimate touch of Jesus. May it be so in all of our lives.

Amen.

Jacki Coyle, March 2, 2008