

Blind Spots

In the name of him who looking at us, loves us, dear friends in Christ: A few days ago I acquired a pair of glasses with a new prescription. The frames are similar to ones I had before, so I probably look the same to you; but trust me, this morning, from where I'm standing, you don't look the same to me. No, today you're a lot sharper and your features are far more distinct. I see you a lot better than I did. And I'm sure that anyone who wears corrective lenses knows what I'm talking about. Vision changes over time; but because it happens so gradually, you don't realize how bad it's getting. And then you put on the new lenses – and wow, I didn't see what I was missing.

But no matter how good your vision is, all of us have blind spots; two, to be precise, one in each eye. It's because there's a place in the back of your eye where the optic nerve passes through the optic disc, resulting in a gap in the photoreceptors on the retina. The upshot is that there's a spot in front of each one of your eyes that it simply cannot see. However, you're usually not aware of it because you have two eyes and your brain automatically interpolates a bit to fill in the gaps. Thus you might say you're blind even to your blind spots.

Let me suggest that just as we have blind spots with respect to our physical sight, so also we have blind spots with respect to our spiritual condition. When you stand before the mirror and examine yourself – your heart, your mind, your feelings, your actions – in the light of God's Holy Law, you don't see what he does; not a tiny fraction of it. Part of the problem is that our spiritual vision is bad to begin with; but we've lived with it so long we don't know how bad it is. If we could sharpen up the image with some new lenses, why, we'd see a whole lot more of the sin and corruption that's there. But we would still have the blind spots: the sins that we cannot see.

This is what's going on with the man in today's Gospel. He runs up to Jesus and asks him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replies, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." Now, that should have been a clue. If no one is good except God, that means the man himself is not good. The trouble is that he thinks he is. When Jesus recites the commandments to him, he says, "No problem, I've done all that since my youth." He's completely blind to his many sins. He has no idea how bad he is. But here's the hopeful part: he seems to be aware that he has a blind spot. The fact that he's asking Jesus about what he must do to inherit life tells us that he doesn't feel he's done enough. He's got some nagging doubt there. That's a start; but he can't see what he's missing. So Jesus, loving him, helps him see himself better. "Okay, tell you what you do. You lack one thing. Go sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me."

Now, please understand that Jesus is not saying this is what God requires of everyone to gain salvation. He says it to show the man his sins. The guy finds himself unwilling to do what Jesus tells him. And as he walks away discouraged, he's forced to ask himself why, why am I not willing. Answer: I'm more attached to my worldly wealth and to my life of comfort than I am willing to follow the Lord and gain life and treasures in heaven. That means I'm hopelessly shallow materialist. Besides, what would I live on? If I gave it all away, I'd be in bad shape, might even starve or go naked – which means I don't trust God to take care of me. And that means I trust in my wealth more, which means my wealth is my god. And another reason I don't want to give my wealth away is that I think the poor don't deserve to have it. *I* worked for it. It's *mine*. Why should I share with *them*? That means I don't love my neighbors as myself. And

this is just the beginning. Jesus has opened his eyes to a whole mess of sin he couldn't see before. It sounds harsh, but it was the loving thing to do. Jesus wants the man to despair of himself and his ability to earn eternal life by keeping the Law of God. Only then will he see his need for a Savior – the Savior he rightly called “Good Teacher”. Hopefully he got there one day. And maybe he did, for some theologians believe this man to be none other than St. Mark who recorded this account for us.

But whether it was Mark or not, this man had the advantage of having an inkling of doubt that led him to ask Jesus the question in the first place. The same, sad to say, cannot be said of the people to whom the Lord sent the prophet Amos to warn them of the judgments to come upon them if they did not repent of their sins and return to the Lord.

The ministry of Amos took place in the first half of the 8th century before Christ. It was the era of the divided kingdom in which you had the ten northern tribes united together in what was called Israel with its capital of city Samaria, and the tribe of Judah being its own separate kingdom in the south with its capital of Jerusalem. The people of God had been divided this way into two kingdoms since the death of Solomon, about 170 years earlier.

Now, in general, the southern kingdom was a lot more stable both politically and religiously than their neighbor to the north. Politically, Judah remained under the leadership of the kings of the line of David. There was continuity in the dynastic line. Religiously, the one true Temple of God was in Jerusalem. That's where the Lord lived on earth. It was the only place that sacrifices for sin could legitimately be offered. It was the only place genuine priests of God could serve. And it was the one place all the Israelites were to visit during the three annual pilgrim festivals: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. For a faithful person of that time, only Jerusalem could be the center of religious life.

Things were a lot more troublesome in the northern kingdom of Israel. Politically they'd been through several dynastic upsets. Kings and their whole families had been wiped out by assassins and scheming men who set themselves up as the new king – until they too were assassinated together with their entire families by the next pretender to the throne. And if their politics were messy, their religious situation was even worse. That's because the first monarch of the northern kingdom, a fellow named Jeroboam, didn't want his subjects focused on Jerusalem as the center of their religious devotion. He thought that if folks were still looking to the Temple there as God's home on earth and were continuing to go there for pilgrim festivals, it would only be a matter of time before they thought of the king there as their king too. And he didn't want that.

So, what he did was to set up alternate – and I should say highly unauthorized – temples to the Lord within the boundaries of his own country. To make things easy for his subjects he erected two: one near the southern border at Bethel to catch those who were on their way to Jerusalem and would be tempted to stop short at this more convenient site, and the other way on the northern edge of his kingdom at Dan so the folks up that way would naturally prefer going there than making the much farther trip south. Very clever of him. Oh, and since he didn't have the one Ark of the Covenant to mark the special place of God's presence on earth like they had in Jerusalem, he borrowed an idea from Israel's checkered past and made golden idols of calves to represent the Lord in his temples. If you're familiar with that story, the one about the golden calf, you can see where this is going; and if you're thinking it's not good, you're right.

When you build a church on a theology that begins by breaking the most foundational rules, you can be sure the rest is going to be messed up too. And so it was. The religion of the northern kingdom became a mishmash of pagan idolatry – a sort of cafeteria religion patched

together with a little of this a little of that taken from the false religions of the neighboring nations, and a lot of “no thanks, I’ll pass on that” to the stuff that’s actually good for you. And of course if the teachings of the faith were bad, it follows that the lives people lived shaped by their faith would also be bad. Bad theology leads to bad practice. No, it didn’t happen overnight. The slide into complete paganism occurred over time and by degrees, each generation taking it a step farther down the path. But 170 years into the process, no one knew any better. They were born and raised in it. And yet, here’s the kicker, the people of the northern kingdom still thought of themselves as the Lord’s chosen people Israel who were rightly worshipping the one true God. They were blind to the truth of their spiritual condition.

So the Lord sent Amos to help them see. The text we heard earlier is a good representation of the prophet’s much longer message. His first concern is that his hearers seek the Lord – the one true God whose Temple was in Jerusalem – because at present they weren’t. They thought the Lord was with them; but he wasn’t. The god they believed in was a human construct, just like the idols they made to represent him. Amos stressed that only in the Lord who dwelt and was worshipped Jerusalem was there forgiveness, life, and salvation. He warned them that adhering to their false gods could only result in death, both in time and eternity. The Lord was angry with them on account of their idolatry, and he was threatening to break out upon them like fire. First and foremost, Amos wanted them to see that.

But he also wanted them to see the whole picture of their spiritual condition – just how bad they were. And so he details a lot of other sins that were rife among them. Many of them have to do with issues of social justice, how the rich and powerful were corrupting the judicial system to oppress the poor and powerless. They were bribing judges to make decisions that favored them and increased their wealth, and they were placing heavy tax burdens on those who could least afford them. The poor were struggling and starving all around them; but their heartless oppressors sitting in their fancy houses of stone were blind to the misery they were inflicting on their neighbors. In other places in Amos’ prophecy, he cites their dishonest business practices, how they used rigged scales to cheat buyers at the markets, and how they’d sweep up the grain that spilled and put it together with the dust back into the bins they sold from – a practice both unethical and unsafe for those who purchased.

Through the message of Amos the Lord wanted these wayward people to see the whole truth about themselves. He wanted them to see their sins, repent, turn back to him, and be saved. But as the saying goes: there are none so blind as those who refuse to see. Amos’ words fell mostly on deaf ears. He was run off, and by some accounts put to death. And within a generation the nation he was sent to try to save was destroyed, just as the prophet foretold. They were blind to their sins and thus they couldn’t see the judgment coming until it was too late.

Amos died in the 8th century before Christ; but today in Christ’s Church, the prophet still speaks. He speaks to you and to me. And through his words the Lord wants us to see our blind spots. First he would have us see our idolatry. You say, “Wait, I’m here in church worshipping the one true God. I don’t have any idols!” Oh yes you do. The First Commandment requires that you fear, love, and trust in the Lord above all things. And you don’t. There are things you fear more, there are things you love more, and there are certainly things you trust more than the Lord. I can’t say what they are. For each of us it’s different. But you know what yours are. You can see them now. Those things are your idols. Amos calls you to repent of your idolatry, and to seek the Lord and live.

And through the prophet the Lord would have you see the whole truth about your spiritual condition. But, of course, the trouble with blind spots is that you can’t see them. And

the truth is that most of us don't want to see them. We get angry and resentful when someone like Amos (or the pastor preaching on Amos) points them out. But that's a good place to start: that anger and resentment we feel when someone points out a sin in our lives. That anger is itself a sin. We should be happy to hear the truth. Instead we go on the defense and either deny or try to justify ourselves. And that too is a sin. The correct response when sin is revealed is to repent. But we don't. Not always, anyway. And that lack of repentance too is a sin.

What other blind spots do we have? How about matters of social justice? We live in the wealthiest nation on earth. All the finest and best is at our disposal. Most of us have never really known chronic hunger or life endangering need. Vast numbers in this world do. They live and die in it constantly. And how do we feel about them? Do we judge them? That's what you get for not having the dumb luck to be born here. Do we resent them? Setting aside for a moment questions of national security – I don't pretend to have all the answers here – but when you hear of some poor Guatemalan who risks life and limb to escape abject poverty in his village that's ruled by a violent drug cartel, who is trying to secure a safe and better future for himself and his family the only way he knows how, by attempting to come into this country illegally – do you love that man as Christ our Lord loves him? I'm not asking if what he's doing is right or about how we should handle our problems with illegal immigration. I'm asking do you love him? Or do you resent him; resent him for doing exactly the same thing you would do if you were in his sandals (or more likely his bare feet)? I could ask the same question about the poor and socially disadvantaged in this country. You say, "Well, it's their own fault they're poor. If they'd pull themselves up by their bootstraps, get a decent education and a steady job, and stop wasting their money on all that stuff they don't need, they'd be fine." Maybe so. Sounds awfully judgmental though. But the question remains: do you love them? And if so, how are you showing them that love? Blind spots: we all have them.

And there are more. There are the sins we allow ourselves because everyone is doing them – and if everyone does it, it must be okay, right? Even if God's Word says otherwise. And there are the sins of which of we are actually proud. See if this sounds familiar: "I have no patience for people who ..." and you can fill in the blank here however you want. Have you said that? Patience is a godly virtue. Lack of patience is a sin. And yet we announce it as if it were a good thing. The same is true of anger and frustration when little things go wrong, or when the driver in the car ahead of you is going too slow or fails to signal a turn, or when the salesclerk at the store makes a mistake or is taking too long to conduct a transaction. This unrighteous anger is deadly sin, yet we're blind to it most of the time. I could go on talking about our blind spots, but by doing so I might tempt you to sin by being impatient with me.

Amos warned the people of his day that the Lord's judgment was coming upon them on account of the sins that they refused to see and would not acknowledge. That judgment fell, and a whole nation was lost. Today Amos warns us of the sins in ourselves we do not see – that too often we are blind to. He calls us see them as God sees them – for the filth and corruption they are. He calls us to repent of them; repent of them and turn to Jesus upon whom God's righteous judgment fell in our place. He bore the burden of our sin in order to save us. And the more we see the sin in ourselves, the greater we will see our need for the Savior God sent us in his Son. Therefore today and every day may our good and gracious God open our eyes to our blind spots. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!