



**St. Philip Anglican Church**

A Spacious Place of Welcome

Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 19 March, Lent 4, Allen's first Sunday at St Philip

Rev Allen Doerksen

Starts: 39:20

<https://youtu.be/GGDw4gotCTA?t=2361>

That was a long Gospel reading, well read, thank you, and it's one of the things about John's gospel, it's got these long dialogues that are actually very illuminating .

Well, it's so very good to be with you. I want to thank Bishop Anna and the search committee for asking me to be your new incumbent. It's a great privilege, and I look forward to our common journey together. I know that you already enjoy each other's company, and I hope that you'll come to enjoy mine, as we grow into our calling to be a company of Jesus' companions on a common quest. So this sermon will be a little bit different than ones I would normally give; I'm going to tell just a little bit about my story, as a way of introducing myself, linking that story to a couple of the themes that I'll draw from the readings.

A few years ago I had the privilege of taking an introductory course in the practices of clinical counseling. In that class we practiced the basic counseling skills on each other, alongside trying to understand ourselves as counselors a bit better. There's probably people here that are in that field, or who have done that. Part of the course was made up of doing a genogram. Anybody here done a genogram? - A few people. You'll know what that's about, then: it looks at relational patterns, traumas, and major life events in the immediate generations preceding you, or us. Lots to learn there, for sure, but one of the main takeaways for me was that I grew up the firstborn son of a first-generation immigrant on my father's side. In his first 12 years of his life, in the Chaco Desert in Paraguay, he was dirt poor; didn't own a pair of shoes until he emigrated to Canada at that age, and he told me that in the Chaco Desert he often went to bed hungry. For him, Canada was a kind of paradise.

I am also the son of a second generation Canadian, my mother, may she rest in peace. She was born in Canada, though her parents had escaped Stalin's purges in the Ukraine a decade earlier. By the time she was a teenager in the late '40s, the family had a successful farm, her parents wintering in Palm Springs back in the early '50s when that was the hangout of I guess it was Sinatra and the boys - back before that was a thing for Canadians in southern British Columbia. If not for her biological sex, mired in a particular kind of religious culture at a particular time, she would have been a pastor, she told me many times - so for her, Canada wasn't Utopia, but a place where however good life was, her dream was suppressed.

What I learned as I took the course, because as I knew all of that, of course, before I took the course, was that there's a profile for first born sons who grew up in that sort of a family. Who knew? Serious, responsible, idealistic, bent on things like becoming philosophers or priests or clinical counselors - but also zany on the edges. Yep, that's me - my children's frequent eye-rolls will attest to this weird combination. Where's dad gonna go once this serious discussion gets a little old? will he do something absurd? It's always a background question. I just wanna leave that out there so you can have it as a background question. [laughter] It's probably why I've always been attracted to the humour of Monty Python; it's why, when I realized that my first day as your priest would be March 15<sup>th</sup>, one of my very first thoughts - I kid you not - was, "Beware!" You can complete it. Or when I read the first lesson for today, I thought a great opening line for my first sermon at Saint Philip would be Samuel's answer to the query about his motivation and coming: "I come in peace." Now, that one probably isn't that far from the mark, is it? because some of you are probably wondering, "I wonder in what kind of spirit this Doerksen fella is coming?"

OK - so from zany to serious: I grew up in the midst of religious fundamentalism. It was the tradition my parents grew up in, so I don't blame them, and indeed they changed a lot over the years, but as a young boy it affected me very negatively indeed. As the parents of the blind man can attest, I was filled with fear - for me it was from a very early age. I spent most of my youth trying to run from this fear until in my early 20s, Jesus saved me from Jesus. I can put it that way, which is to say I had an encounter with God in Christ that saved me from this fundamentalist focus on fear that I thought of as Christian religion. My life changed from that moment on, although with lots of failings, mistakes, anxiety, and sins along the way, and that is still true today - but after that encounter with love, a sense of adventure took fear's place. In that sense I owe Jesus everything:

when you've lived with fear so pervasive that it's led to a psychotic break, and you discover that Love actually is at the heart, "the deep-down freshness at the heart of things," as the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said, then you feel free - free to explore the world.

And so I interrupted my university courses to serve Christ in the Middle East, in the war zone of Lebanon. I remember checking in at the consulate in Beirut, and them desperately trying to get me on an airplane out of that civil war zone, and me being just as adamant: "I'm staying here to help in any way I can." And then I went from there to teaching English on the West Bank in a Palestinian boys' boarding school. And in the village of Beit Jala, just two kilometres from Bethlehem, I found the girl of my dreams - actually far more amazing than I dared to dream - and she is the one of the reasons I'm on Vancouver Island. She got a job before I did; she is the new rector of Holy Trinity in North Saanich. I'm sure you'll get to meet her soon. But I mean, how romantic is Jesus, right ?? I'm following Jesus and I meet my partner! After moving to Canada, I joined a thriving independent church and shortly after finishing my undergrad degree with a couple of seminary courses thrown in like sprigs in a cocktail, I was commissioned as a pastor [in] my early 20s.

That adventure is a whole different tale: suffice to say that it involved helping the underground church in Russia and China and several other places. At the same time Denise and I were on these exterior journeys, we were starting a family, and we have three wonderful adult boys. I'll tell you about them at some point. But at the same time we were also beginning an intoxicating interior journey into the lands that I call the Great Tradition. For Denise it was like going home; she was raised Roman Catholic and had a great experience of a large progressive parish just outside of Minneapolis, but for me everything was new. What most Catholics and Anglicans assume, or don't know they assume, was for me like hiking in the Alps. Some of you have had this experience, I'm sure: around every corner, there's a new, breathtaking scene. I found that I wasn't just learning a bunch of information though, but I was feeling it. I was kind of living into God's purposes and presence in the quest, and the Anglican church became a kind of natural landing spot for both of us, because Denise was called to ordained ministry, and you know what that's like, trying to do that as a woman in the Roman Catholic Church, and for me it had the added benefit of being a place that allowed for honest inquiry, where modern knowledge, scientific knowledge, historical knowledge, psychological knowledge, was integrated into spiritual experiences, and where experimenting with a variety of practices was encouraged.

Now all of this, of course, took a great deal of time and effort, with various amounts of confusion thrown in. It still does, and I know that many of you can relate in whatever life you've fashioned or been given, and whatever vocation you've found yourself called to or thrown into. It's always a long-term adventure, isn't it - but as I reflect back and now think forward to what will unfold in this new relationship, there are several things that stand out. Probably one of the most important is the theme I'm drawing from both our readings today: if we want to partner with God's love in the world, we have to learn to see the way God sees.

I could break this down a little bit: to start, first impressions, kind of like we're experiencing right now, though touted as very important - you only have one opportunity right to make a first impression - are actually not important. I mean maybe if you're picking out that dress you love or something like that, yes, but they're not that important when it comes to the very important things of life, like people, like our purpose, like our journey. If Samuel had gone off his initial impressions, Israel's history may have been derailed. And as a counselor, as a pastoral counselor, I can tell you that love at first sight, if it lasts, is more about luck than talent - you just happened upon "the one" whose character matched the attraction. It is the second sight, the love born of discernment, sometimes of suffering, that wins partnership with God's purposes.

What Samuel had learned is that he needed to look to the heart, not merely follow his first impressions. But even true discernment takes time to unspool: there was, by most scholars' reckoning, a 15 year gap between the events narrated here and when David is crowned king at age 30. At many times along the way, it must have seemed that Samuel's anointing was a ruse, so powerful were the forces arrayed against him, against David that is. What the Bible teaches repeatedly - and this is why it is the book of wisdom for us - is that learning to see or to discern doesn't spare us from the journey that is to follow, but gives us the courage for it. It enables it.

There are powerful forces that seek to derail us from seeing - something that is brought out in our gospel text. These forces are the way we - again, pun intended - look at the world. One of the most pervasive is our belief in scarcity, so when blessing comes to one, it seems to imply that God doesn't love us so much. So David's brothers, I'm sure, from the day he was anointed, held a grudge against him. He had lost his easy relationship with them. There are many stories we could tell - you can find them anecdotally online - of somebody who's living in a supposedly friendly neighbourhood, wins the lottery, and everyone around them turns on them in env.

Something similar is going on when Jesus heals the man blind from birth. It starts with the neighbours, who you'd think would be happy for him. When something like this happens, all of a sudden we wonder, don't we, well, why did that person get healed and I didn't? When my partner is still convalescing or doesn't seem to have any road towards health and happiness? They drag this man in front of the religious leaders, who, when confronted with a man who amazingly can see, are not able to see, even though they've always had their sight.

As I've been involved in pastoral ministry for over half my life now, including my earlier non-Anglican ministry, I've come to understand that learning to see or to discern happens when a group of people - let's just say a parish - is on a journey from self-interested envy to community belonging and commitment, when we move from self-interest alone to seeing that our self-interest is tied up with each other. Maybe this will sound controversial to say, but the point of the gospel text is exactly something like this. Yes, it's about the physical healing that comes to this man as a first sight, and it's amazing that it did, but just in and of itself, this first healing would have presented this man no end of problems, including that he had no skills - remember, he was born blind - no way to make a living, since begging was now out of the question, and he's also made enemies. Perhaps even his own parents won't receive him. The point is the second sight he receives in dialogue with Jesus, a second sight that is at the heart of living well wherever we are at in our struggles: learning to see together, learning to love together, learning to discern together in God's new commons, living from a sense that God's goodness is for all creation, for everyone around us, and just so for us too. That's our heritage. That's our challenging journey, and our missional identity.

Amen, may it be so, as we build this relationship.