

Open the eyes of my heart ... again

Acts 10

March 5, 2006

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.

Those words were written by John Newton, a one-time slave ship captain who became a minister of the gospel and an outspoken critic of the slave trade. In March 1748, in the midst of a violent Atlantic storm, he prayed for the Lord's mercy, and the Lord was merciful. Newton and the ship and most of his sea mates were spared by the storm, though Newton believed he hardly deserved it. That experience of undeserved favor was for him a turning point in his life, and he began then to open the eyes of his heart to the God of infinite mercy and amazing grace.

The same words could have been written by Saul. On the road to Damascus, Saul met Jesus. Jesus stopped him in his tracks; Jesus confronted him. Jesus showed him who he -- Saul -- really was, and Jesus showed him who he -- Jesus -- really was. Saul was blind, but Jesus opened the eyes of his heart. Saul was lost, but Jesus pointed him in a new direction, and Saul, the determined persecutor of the church, became one of the church's leading evangelists.

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.

Maybe you could have written those same words. Maybe you were lost, but Jesus found you. Maybe you know what it's like to have your life turned around, to begin to see yourself and other people and the world and God in a whole new light, to begin to understand the meaning of the love of God for you, to experience a spiritual rebirth. Maybe you can say it and mean it: *I once was blind, but now I see.*

But I have a confession to make. I am a believer. I am a determined, dedicated, passionate disciple of Jesus Christ. I know that Jesus has opened the eyes of my heart, but I still get lost, and, at certain times, in certain situations, I am still quite blind.

I do not see Jesus, right in front of my eyes. I do not see what God is doing, right in front of my eyes. I do not see the one who needs something that I have to give, right in front of eyes. I do not see you, right in front of my eyes.

That's the bad news. The good news is: God is not finished with me yet! Or with you!

The story of Peter's visit to the home of the Roman captain, Cornelius, is a watershed in the story of the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It's a story about the conversion of the Gentile, Cornelius, along with members of his family and his gathered friends, a story about crossing boundaries and about the offer of God's gift of grace and power and peace, not just to the descendants of Abraham, but to a whole world of people and to you. But it's also a story about Peter, about the ongoing transformation of Peter's mind and heart. Jesus is still working on Peter, still teaching him, still leading him, still opening the eyes of his heart.

Peter was a human being, like the rest of us. He was eager and passionate and perceptive, but sometimes reckless and impulsive and weak. He made mistakes. He broke promises. But what impresses me about Peter is his capacity to learn from his mistakes, to pick himself up after falling on his face, or rather, to allow himself to be

picked up after falling on his face! Judas betrayed Jesus, and killed himself in shame. Peter betrayed Jesus, too, but accepted Jesus' forgiveness and went forward with joy.

Peter is teachable. Saul is bullheaded! When the Lord wanted to change Saul's heart, the Lord had to stop him in his tracks, strike him blind, and address him in no uncertain terms, just to get his attention!

But to change Peter's heart, all the Lord had to do was drop a hint. OK ... the Lord had to drop the hint three times, but Peter got it! Peter got the hint! When the messengers came to his house and asked him to come with them to Caesarea, he went, because he got it. He understood that his dream wasn't just about food. He understood that God was showing him that he must not consider any person unclean.

For some of us, it takes blinding light, a violent storm, a personal crisis, a terrible loss, a crushing failure, to get our attention and make us face reality. For those of us like Saul, for those of us like John Newton. Maybe for you.

But for others of us, it may only take a gentle nudge, a timely reminder, a simple invitation. For those of us like Peter. And maybe, like you. People who see because they are looking. People who hear because they are listening. People who hear God speak because they expect to hear God speak. People whose hearts may be more readily changed, because they have already decided to follow Jesus wherever Jesus might lead them.

On the road to Damascus, the Lord opened the eyes of Saul's heart. And on a rooftop in Joppa, the Lord opened the eyes of Peter's heart ... again.

I want to draw three lessons for us from this story in Acts. The first is this: there is no single pattern for spiritual transformation. God is in the business of changing minds and hearts, but God doesn't always do it in the same way. Peter and Saul are two different people, with two different temperaments and two different personalities. God does not address them in the same way. You and I are different people, with different temperaments and different personalities. It is likely that God will not address us or direct us in exactly the same way. There is no set pattern for spiritual transformation, except for this: spiritual growth is an ongoing and still unfinished process for all of us!

However, and this is the second lesson, God will plant the seeds for spiritual growth however God chooses, but we can prepare the ground! We may be strong-willed, but we don't have to be bullheaded! We can make time to pray and to listen. We can make worship and Bible study a regular habit. We can meet with each other to seek and give counsel. We don't make spiritual transformation happen, but we can put ourselves in a position where it can happen more readily.

It's like the coaches are always saying: *We try to put ourselves in a position to win.* Just this week, Greg McDermott, the basketball coach at the University of Northern Iowa, was quoted as saying something like that: *My focus has been trying to prepare this team the best we can, to give ourselves the best opportunity to win.*

The point is, you can't control all the variables. You don't always know which way the ball is going to bounce. You can never guarantee a win, but you can prepare and work hard and think hard and put yourself in a position where winning is a distinct possibility!

We can be like Peter, a praying person, a teachable person, a person open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. We can put ourselves in a position where spiritual growth is a distinct possibility!

And the third lesson? Expect change. Expect to be transformed. God is still speaking ... to us! Be open to being evangelized! Being evangelized is a prerequisite to doing evangelism. Peter was an effective evangelist, precisely because he was open to being evangelized. In other words, we will have something of value to share with the rest of the world, once we have first experienced it ourselves. We can genuinely tell other folks that God can transform their lives, when we have allowed God to transform ours.

I am thankful for the ways God has already opened the eyes of my heart.

I have seen Jesus, not just as a distant and mysterious religious figure, not just as a notable moral teacher, not just as a martyr, but as my savior, my friend, my teacher, my Lord.

I have learned to see myself, in context, as a person of value with valuable assets, but one among many, one who needs other people as much as other people need me.

And I have learned to see you, in context, all of you -- all of you -- as people of value with valuable assets, people with something to give, but people, too, like me, with a deep need to receive love and affirmation and forgiveness and healing ... from God.

The Lord has opened the eyes of my heart. The Lord has opened the eyes of our hearts. But we need the Lord to do it for us again, and again, and again, and again!

I told you at the beginning a little of John Newton's story. The storm at sea that marked his conversion and began the process of softening his heart occurred in 1748, but for some years after that, he continued to captain slaving ships, sailing the Triangle Route from England to Africa to the New World and home again. The Lord had begun to open the eyes of his heart, but the Lord had to do it again and again!

It took some time, but Newton's spiritual blindness was eventually cured and he saw the evils of slavery for what they were. The grace of God saved him, and piece by piece, little by little, the grace of God transformed him.

For twenty years, beginning in 1785, John Newton mentored a young politician named William Wilberforce. In 1804, Wilberforce introduced to Parliament a *Motion to Abolish the Slave Trade*, and in March, 1807, just months before Newton died, that bill became law, and, in a sense, John Newton's own journey of spiritual transformation had reached its destination.

I once was blind, but now I see. May God open the eyes of our hearts ... again and again and again!