

## “Blind Spots”

A sermon preached by John Gilbert Horn  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Buffalo, New York  
July 29, 2007

“If you can’t see my mirrors, I can’t see you.” That was the sign on the truck in front of me as I drove our family up Route 14 from Watkins Glen to Geneva alongside beautiful Seneca Lake last weekend. “Well, at least he knows where his blind spots are, even if he doesn’t know who or what is in them. There’s really something to be said for that,” I thought to myself. And then I began to wonder: where are our blind spots? As a nation? As a city? As a church? As individuals? And what is it that is lost in them?

It seems to me that a blind spot is created when we’re looking at the wrong thing, in the wrong way, oblivious to the precious lives, the beauty, the possibility, that exists just out of our view. Sometimes – as I’ve been not so gently reminded over the years – we get blind spots because we’re not paying attention to where we’re going. “If you want to sightsee, honey, why don’t I drive?” Janice will offer. At least, that’s the way she says it the first time! But the problem in that circumstance is simply that I don’t have my eyes on the road, I’ve let myself become distracted. Other times, however, we deliberately take our eyes off the road or fix our eyes on that one comforting point on the horizon because things are coming at us too quickly or going by too fast. Our anxiety – even helplessness – causes us to lock onto the things that give us comfort or certainty – even if they’re the wrong things – because, frankly, we don’t know what else to do. When we do this, I suggest to you, we not only can’t see the things that are or are not in our rearview mirrors, but we can’t even see the mirrors. Blind spots abound.

I think this is understandable; problematic, to be sure, but understandable for at least three reasons. First, we are creatures of the “Information Age,” passengers on a speeding train of technology and virtual connectedness, with data and news and scores and stats whizzing by us by the day, the hour, the minute. We’re headed in this regard for who knows where, but we’re getting there at a breakneck pace. There was a time that I learned what was going on in the world or in our city by sitting down with the Buffalo Evening News or the Courier-Express. Now I get email updates on my Palm Treo from the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, a host of litigation-related websites and, of course, ESPN. This past Thursday, during a break in a talk I was giving downtown, one of the people in attendance blurted out that the Dow Jones was down 180 points. By the time we started up again – three minutes later – he was announcing it was down 250. The market would ultimately fall 400 points and then rebound somewhat to be down just over 300 points by day’s end. My point is not that I minded being “up to date,” but that the information was coming in so quickly as to be virtually meaningless. What does it mean for me that the Dow is down, that Barry Bonds may or may not play tonight as he seeks the two home runs that will push him past Hank Aaron’s home run record or that yet another person has just contradicted Attorney General Gonzales’s testimony before Congress?

Here in the Information Age, the immediate and imminent appear increasingly at risk of eclipsing the important in our lives; some days for me it truly seems that the more I know, the less I know. So we try to tune out the noise and fix our sights on the things that give us comfort, certainty and security, the things we can control. And when we do, we create blind spots.

Related to the dizzying pace of the Information Age is the anxiety created by living in year six of the War on Terror. Al-Qaeda, despite the billions of dollars spent, thousands of lives snuffed out and, I hasten to add, hundreds of other critical initiatives sacrificed, is stronger than ever, a recently released National Intelligence Estimate tells us. How can this be? We're told that we have to keep fighting in Iraq because, if we don't, the terrorists will be at our doorsteps. So what can we do to help? Go about our business. Don't let it affect us. Shop. Keep the economy going. But, oh yes, while we're out there in the malls and super centers, we should keep an eye out. Report anything suspicious. Oh, and another thing: be "patriotic." Support the troops – and by that, really, the war – because to do otherwise, would constitute giving aid and comfort to the enemy. My point here is not to malign the Bush Administration's foreign policy – well, that's not my main point – but rather to suggest that the effect of the War on Terror is to make us want to tune out the noise – even, lamentably, the news – and fix our sights on the things that give us certainty, comfort and security, the things we can control. The cost? Blind spots.

The third force causing us to avert our gaze from the road in front of us – the road God calls us to follow – is the changing face of our faces. Multiculturalism and diversity, while, I submit, objectively honorable to every sensitive heart and intelligent mind, are nevertheless troubling to us because they cause us to embrace differences when we're far more comfortable with what we know, who we've been and what we've looked like. Now, we Presbyterians are never terribly comfortable with change anyway. "How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? Change?!!!" But it's not just us.

William Sloane Coffin, the late Protestant theologian and social activist, wrote:

While often alarming, it should come as no surprise that people everywhere are today very much alive to their own nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation – all those legitimate differences within our common humanity. For the universalism that is their opposite has too often blurred and denied, not to say vigorously repressed, them. So all over the world, people are asserting the particular over and against the universal. It's something we simply have to accept for people cannot be asked to serve a greater whole until they have been acknowledged as individually significant.

Pastor Coffin wrote these words nearly a decade ago. Today – with challenges of "if you're not with us, you're against us" and admonitions to "report anything suspicious" (i.e., different) – the temptation is greater than ever to embrace what Coffin called the "universal" (what I've been referring to this morning as the comfortable, certain and secure) and to reject the different, the diverse and the multicultural, especially when we're told "they" – whoever they are – are "a threat to our very way of life." We

convince ourselves of things, and often times attempt to impose these beliefs on others, because amidst the turmoil, it's best to believe something, anything! But, of course, in our yearning for the secure, the safe and the familiar, we miss the stuff in our rearview mirror, if not the mirrors themselves. We create blindspots, ignorant of the precious lives, the beauty and the possibility that exists just out of view.

So how do we eliminate, or at least minimize, the blind spots, broaden our gaze, let down our guards? My best sense is that we turn to Richard Baxter, the seventeenth century English divine, who lived in a time when the church was being buffeted by many conflicting ideas and movements. That is to say, he lived in a time pretty much like our own. His response to what he saw around him was a three-part motto, which I think serves as a perfect model for us this morning and in the days, months and years to come.

In things essential, unity;  
In things doubtful, liberty;  
In all things, charity.

So what are we as God's children commanded to be unified about? While researching for today's sermon, I was led, perhaps not surprisingly to some of you, to a collection of sermons my father wrote nearly thirty years ago when our family first moved to Buffalo and he began his work at First Presbyterian Church. I was delighted to find my father's statement of these essentials and I am even more delighted to share them with you this morning, not least because I think he was right on target:

1. Compassion for the poor;
2. Justice for the oppressed;
3. Civil rights for the disenfranchised; and
4. Honesty in government.

I believe these imperatives cut across denominational lines, such that every man and woman of faith can agree on their importance. To be unified in aid of these causes, however, means more than just that we can get our heads around them. It means that we can – and must – put aside our differences to the extent necessary to give them meaning, to do something about them. And to those who would reject this call on the grounds that there simply are too many divisions today, too much discord, I would answer in more of Pastor Coffin's words: "All human beings have more in common than they have in conflict, and it is precisely when what they have in conflict seems overriding that what they have in common needs most to be affirmed." James Baldwin said it a different way: "Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other – male in female, white in black and black in white. We are part of each other."

As part of one another and at the same time a part of the body of Christ, we must silence the distractions of the Information Age, reject the suspicion and fear that are some of the pervasive social consequences of the War on Terror and come together in unity – in communion – to care for the poor, free the oppressed, empower the disenfranchised and hold accountable those who would govern us.

“In things doubtful, liberty.” This, it seems to me, is the most challenging of Baxter’s triad, and I am quite certain that it is in wrestling with doubt that we suffer the most blind spots. As life gets more complicated, as calls to take sides get louder, the temptation is to seek refuge – to fix our eyes, if you will – on that which is solid, that which is stable, that which is certain. The problem is that there is very little associated with our human experience about which we can – or even should try – to be certain. In his book, The Conservative Soul, Andrew Sullivan reflects on the centrality of doubt to human existence. “No person,” Sullivan begins, “who ever lived had the perspective of eternity or the gift of omniscience.

Yes, Christians may want to say that of Jesus. But even the Gospels tell us that Jesus doubted on the cross, asking why his own father seemed to have abandoned him. The mystery that Christians are asked to embrace is not that Jesus was God, but that he was God-made-man, which is to say prone to the feelings and doubts and joys and agonies of being human. Jesus himself seemed to make a point of this. He taught in parables rather than in abstract theories. He told stories. He had friends. He got to places late; he misread the actions of others; he wept; he felt disappointment; he asked as many questions as he gave answers; and he was often silent in self-doubt, or elusive, or afraid.

Laying waste in a different way to fictions of certainty, Bart Ehrman, a one-time fundamentalist student at the Moody Bible Institute and now Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, wrote Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why. In a fascinating, if dense, 218 pages, Ehrman reveals the folly of a strict constructionist or literalist interpretation of the Bible: in short, the argument goes, for the 1500 years between the time of Christ and the invention of the printing press, the manuscripts comprising what we regard as the Bible were hand-copied, in different languages, in different countries, by people who changed, added or deleted the words, sometimes accidentally, but often intentionally in view of the political, cultural and theological disputes of their day.

In his introduction, Ehrman writes,

Occasionally I see a bumper sticker that reads: ‘God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.’ My response is always, What if God didn’t say it? What if the book you take as giving God’s words instead contains human words? What if the Bible doesn’t give a foolproof answer to the questions of the modern age – abortion, women’s rights, gay rights, religious supremacy, Western-style democracy, and the like? What if we have to figure out how to live and what to believe on our own, without setting up the Bible as a false idol – or an oracle that gives us a direct line of communication with the Almighty?

I believe God cares deeply about doubtful things, what Ehrman characterizes as “questions of the modern age.” I believe, too, that we are called to deal with “things doubtful,” to address them, not to ignore, deny or temporize. But my answers are not necessarily your answers, nor yours mine. To be honest, mine now may not be mine six months or a year from now. Now this is not, please understand, to say that there are no answers, that there is no truth. God gives us the answers we need when we need them – whether we recognize or understand them or not. As this morning’s scripture so perfectly reminds us, we are given each day our daily bread. Our persistent knocking at the door will result in its being open for us, albeit on God’s timetable, not ours. That’s all the certainty I need.

Meantime, doubt about the “questions of the modern age” abounds. We are all human beings, with beginnings and endings, different beginnings and endings. We see the world through our own eyes, colored by our own prejudices and – hopefully – humbled by our own doubts. God understands this. I truly believe that what God cares about is not that we be certain as to the answers to difficult questions; God cares about how we treat one another as we wrestle with the questions.

Which leads me to charity; in all things, charity. I believe this, after all, is why we are free: to do good. Now, as it happens, I’m not the first one to think this. One of my personal heroes, John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago preached recently that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, must “never forget that in his gracious love, we have been freed finally from all that would threaten, diminish, or oppress us – free from fear, free deep in our hearts and souls, free to live and laugh and love and give our lives away in the service of others.” Pastor Buchanan’s words echo those of Saint Augustine, who, centuries ago, called what we today call “liberty” or “freedom of choice” *libertas minor*. *Libertas major*, the big freedom, was the liberty to make the right choice. Hundreds of years later, at the end of the twentieth century, William Sloane Coffin, articulated our challenge this way: “If we Americans aspire to become a more caring people, democracy and multiculturalism will more than survive; they will thrive. In this century Americans have created a world for some of us; it’s time, in the next century, to create one for all of us.”

Brothers and sisters, “a world for all of us” is what’s been in our blind spots all along. Just beyond our view today is sustenance for the poor, freedom for the oppressed, power for the powerless and accountability for our leaders. To return, then, to things we see when we look in the rearview mirror: this object is closer than it appears. Thank God for that.