

The Perils of Presbyopia

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

 *John 9:1-17*

Sometimes it is difficult – or inconvenient – to see things up close.

Miroslav Volf, the Yale theologian and native of the old Yugoslavia, tells the story of adopting their son Nathanael. They had been put in contact with a pregnant, unwed, soon-to-be-mother who wanted to give her baby up for adoption. Arrangements were made and about three months later the phone call came. The little boy had entered the world. The Volf's couldn't sleep the whole night in preparation for the drive to the hospital to bring home their adopted son. They stopped for a doughnut on the way and in leaving the donut shop parking lot the excited father turned the wrong way on a one way street – directly in front of a police officer. The lights on the officer's car began flashing – so the couple pulled over just minutes away from the hospital and receiving their newborn child. Eager to explain this to the officer – and used to the Yugoslavian custom that when stopped by a police officer you were obligated to get out of the car -- the professor stepped out of the car – only to hear the officer yell: “Get back in the car.” “But you don't understand officer, I just wanted to tell you ...” “Get back in the car!” the officer yelled. Which the professor did. “License and registration.” And from there the air from the balloon of adoption steadily and finally escaped – until they got handed a ticket and stern warning from the officer, “Next time, pay attention.”

Professor Volf does not blame the officer, after all he was the one who made the mistake. The officer was just doing his job and maybe, just maybe, he got out of the wrong side of the bed. But the encounter was a jolting reminder that two human beings can be this close and yet be so far. The excitement of new life – the abrupt enforcement of the law.

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Now medically speaking we all know this to be the case. If you are above the age of 40 you understand that the older you get the more difficult it is to see things up close. It's the rare person over 50 who doesn't have to invest in a pair of readers – or cheaters as they are sometimes called. The older you get the more difficult it is to see things up close. There is a medical term for it – it's called presbyopia. I'm not kidding you. Google it. Not now, preferably. Just take my word for it for the moment. Presbyopia – presby – the Greek root for “elder” or “old man” and opia – the Greek for “eyes” – Old man's eyes – Presbyopia. The increasing inability to see things up close. It may be the only eye disorder that we can commonly bring to this story this morning about the man born blind. It's a long story and we only read the start of it. Jesus comes across a man blind from birth – and chooses in the moment to heal the man of his blindness. He does it in a rather unique way – mixing his saliva with the dust of the earth – the two basic elements of life –dust and water – and tells the man to wash in the nearby public pool. And mysteriously and miraculously the man is able to see. But then something strange happens – the crowd and the religious leaders can't quite see what's happened. They can't quite see up close enough to understand what's taken place. They are trying as best they can to explain this thing away. Even to suggest not that something right has happened, but that something wrong has happened. The seeing man is an impostor. Jesus has broken the laws of the Sabbath. Anything that would keep them from seeing up close what really has taken place – a blind man can now see. And so as the story ironically goes: A blind one ends up seeing and the seeing ones end up going blind. It was just too difficult – or too inconvenient – to see things up close.

And it may be John the Gospel writer's way of telling us that while Jesus most certainly exhibited the power to physically heal the physically blind – that maybe the greater concern he had – the more common

“The view is a little different the closer you get.”

concern he had – was the spiritual healing of the spiritually blind.

Remember the story of good King David who finally arrives at the pinnacle of Israelite society – the king high in his palace. But being King gets you pretty far from the people – and before you know it they're not really people anymore. And that's when the good King looks down and sees Bathsheba. But he's far enough away to see just a beautiful woman and not another man's wife. And so they have their affair and she conceives. And now the King is far enough away to see Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, not as a comrade, but as a foil. And before we know it Uriah is dead – and the king still can't quite see. And then Nathan tells him a story about a man stealing another man's lamb – and now the king can see! And Nathan says, “Look closer. You are the man.”

Sometimes it is difficult – or inconvenient – or painful -- to see things up close.

Because isn't it true – we presbyopians (or soon to be presbyopians)-- that the real concern Jesus might have with us – is not how much we might need those little cheaters – but how much we may need to deal with our spiritual blindness – the increasing inability or the increasing indifference to see things up close. Because the truth is it does get easier and easier doesn't it to step further and further back – and see the world in these rather large and incomplete categories. These people fit here, these people fit there. This issue is all about this – that issue is all about that. And the further and further away I get from it – the clearer and clearer it becomes. And the two minutes it took for me to read about it in the

paper or hear about it on the news – is sufficient for me to understand what's really going on. And so it affords me the chance to pronounce these rather broad judgments about these rather broad groupings – and before I know it the guy who turned the wrong way is just another dope who isn't paying attention. I can get this close and not see what I am seeing.

It makes me think of my first trip to Honduras years ago. Five years before going I could not have located Honduras on a map except to guess that it was in Central America. Honduras was just one of those struggling Latin American mismanaged countries that was really poor and isn't it a shame they can't figure it out and maybe, just maybe, they are getting what they deserve. But then the global partners committee in the church I last served – caught a vision for Honduras and they started traveling down there. They, not me. But then it came time for me. I went down. And got face to face not with Honduras – but with Hondurans. And they turned out to be these human beings. Old folk and little children. Rich and poor. Good and bad. No, it wasn't a Hallmark card. The closer you got the more complicated it got. But they were real – dust and water and spirit. And they had hurts and hopes. And they each had these stories that lasted longer than two minutes. Can you imagine that? And maybe I've made a dozen trips down there since – and yet I still can't get out of my mind this little seven year old Maria I met on my first trip – who laughed just like my little seven year old laughed and dreamed just like my little seven year old dreamed and cried just like my little seven year old cried. And she doesn't fit into any of my big, big categories. I hate that. And yet what I like – when I am able to see up

close – is that this Maria turns on the valve inside my soul – and I start wondering how can I do something for Maria. And I see inside myself not scarcity but actually more than I need. And not because of me, but because of Maria, my cup starts overflowing.

It's the kind of thing that happens when we put on our spiritual cheaters – and see up close. A valve opens and our cup runneth over.

It makes me think of a man in the church in which I grew up. I'll call him Jim. Jim sent his oldest son off to fight in the Vietnam War praying that he would come home alive. He didn't. Instead they held a funeral with military honors and Jim received from the honor guard the sacred folded flag. And then in 1975 in his effort to begin healing the nation President Gerald Ford instituted the first amnesty for those who had fled the country to avoid the draft. This incensed Jim. His boy went and died. And these boys ran away and lived. So Jim did the only thing he thought to do – he took the sacred flag that had draped his son's casket – and put it in a box and sent it back to the White House. "If that's what you think of my son's sacrifice – well then you can have your flag back." Such was the view from Detroit to Washington, DC.

But then a week later Jim got a phone call from the White House. The President received your flag. He wants to meet with you. Would you be willing to give the President some minutes of your time? Jim was enough of a patriot to believe that when the Commander in Chief calls you come. So he went and they ushered him into the Blue Room. And he sat and in a couple of minutes in walked President Gerald R. Ford and under the arm of the President was the flag of Jim's son. And the President sat. And the two fathers talked. The two veterans talked. The two Americans talked. And at the end of it the President said to Jim, "It is because of sons like yours that made my decision so difficult. Allow not my hope to heal to diminish in any way the value of your son's sacrifice. On behalf of a grateful country, and a grateful President, please accept again this flag." And

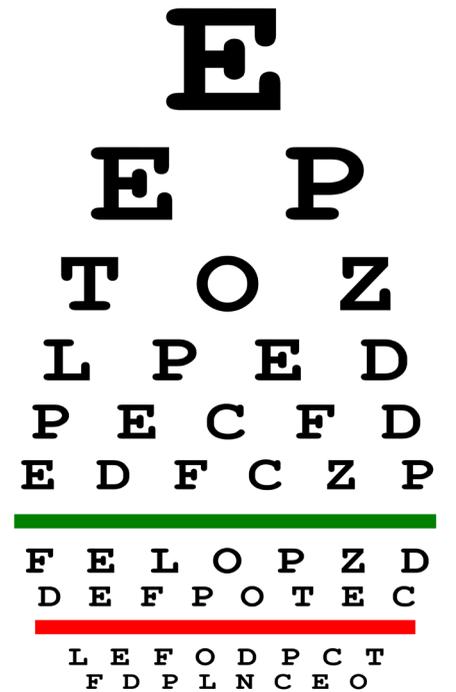
Jim generously and graciously accepted again the flag of his son. And from that point of there wasn't much President Ford could do that his brother Jim wouldn't support.

The view is a little different the closer you get.

The story is told of a time near the first part of the last century when the great concert pianist, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, was invited by a couple of students at Stanford University to give a concert on their campus. It was a plot on the part of the students to raise enough money for themselves to help pay their tuition which they couldn't afford. The great Paderewski agreed to come for a fee of \$2000. He came and performed a wonderful concert. And when the concert was over the two students showed up backstage and with forlorn faces informed the great pianist that they had only raised \$1600 in ticket sales --they were \$400 short and hadn't even paid the expenses. They handed Paderewski a \$1600 check and asked if it was at all possible to give him an IOU for the \$400 and that they would work to earn the money and send it to him when he returned to Europe. Paderewski thought a moment and then in front of the students took the \$1600 check and tore it in two and said, "I'm sorry you didn't raise the money boys, but I'll tell you what. Take the \$1600, pay for your expenses, and keep the rest."

Years later, long after Paderewski had returned to his native Poland, World War I broke out and in its aftermath much of Europe laid waste. Paderewski had since been elected Prime Minister and was preparing himself to intervene with the United States to assist his starving Polish and European countrymen. But prior to his trip President Herbert Hoover made the decision to open our storehouses and to ship food to Poland and the rest of Europe. Paderewski made the trip to the U.S. to thank the president for the gracious act of humanitarian aid. "What can we ever do to repay you?" Paderewski asked. Hoover waved the question aside and reminded the great pianist that he was one of those two Stanford students whose debt he had forgiven long before.

So without my glasses things get pretty fuzzy the closer I look. And every ounce in my body wants to get clarity by moving further and further back. But the further and further back I go – the less folks look like they're human. And the less human they get, the less human I get. The less human they get, the less generous I get. I wonder if that isn't why the good ol' Lord came down long ago? Stepped out of his palace and showed up in a dirty ol' stable in a one-horse town. And ended up walking the dusty trails and stopping by the blind and the lepers and the poor and the forgotten. Stopped and looked real close. And then after he had looked real close – he stretched out his arms real, real wide. Nailed them to a beam so he could keep them there. And said, "Now that I've seen you, this is how much I love you." It's the kind of thing that happens the closer you get.



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