

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Open Hearts, Open Eyes, New Beginnings
March 15, 2026

1 Samuel 16:1-13 and John 9:1-41

I have much to learn when it comes to all that happens here on our church campus. Every time I am here, I see new things.

When I arrived on Wednesday, Peck greeted me and asked if anyone had shown me the Community Eye Clinic yet. When I said, "no", he walked me over and introduced me to the co-directors, Dr. Deakins and Dr. Terrell.

They showed me around. I saw how space within the walls of First Christian Church has been transformed into a welcoming, state-of-the-art eye clinic. I met many of the people who make the clinic possible and who provide care for those in need in our community. And I saw a few of the first patients arriving to get help with their vision.

It was a lot to take in all at once. As we finished the tour, it became clear to me that I was observing holy work.

Day in and day out, people come here seeking to see more clearly. Given our relationship with the Community Eye Clinic just steps away, today's Gospel reading feels particularly relevant.

We encounter a lengthy story about a man born blind whose sight is restored. In many ways, this is a story about vision. It teaches us about what it means to see and gives us an opportunity to learn what it means to miss what is right in front of us.

The Old Testament reading from 1 Samuel, however, is a little tougher. It feels like an entirely different kind of story.

The prophet Samuel is sent to Bethlehem to anoint a new king. It is a subversive act since there is still a king on the throne. Even so, he carries out the mission.

Jesse lines up his sons, one by one, with each showing clear promise. Samuel knows the cultural norms and therefore assumes the eldest will be chosen by God.

But God disrupts Samuel's assumptions with a line that echoes through the centuries: Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature . . . for the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."¹

And then, only then, the youngest son is called in from the fields. This shepherd boy was such an unlikely candidate that his own father hadn't invited him to be part of the lineup.

Meet David. The unlikely one. The overlooked one. The youngest one. And, the one whose heart God had already seen.

In both of today's readings, something surprising happens around the theme of sight. In John's Gospel, the one who cannot see ends up seeing most clearly while the religious authorities who think they see quite well end up being the ones who are blind. In 1 Samuel, the prophet who assumes he knows what a king should look like learns that God sees differently.

This reveals a simple but powerful truth: God sees our open hearts. God can open our eyes. And God knows what is possible.

Those truths matter for every congregation, but they are especially powerful for us here and now. During the initial weeks of this transitional time that we call interim ministry, they speak directly to us and our situation.

After all, interim seasons are, by their nature, times of new beginnings. Interim time begins with slowing down and reflecting. Interim time continues as folks struggle together with important questions that defy easy answers.

Questions like: What has God been doing among us? Who are we now? How is God preparing us for what comes next?

¹ | Samuel 16:7, RSV

These are not the sort of questions you should try to answer on your own. Even together, answering will take time. To answer these and other interim questions we must explore them together with open hearts and open eyes.

This brings me back to the clinic and to Jenn and Jennifer . . . I should mention that I quickly came to know the clinic's co-directors on a first name basis. While they showed me around, we realized something interesting. We know many of the same people serving in charitable medicine and have even served some of the same patients.²

Maybe this is possible because we share a particular way of seeing the world. Our eyes have been trained to notice people living on the margins – the same people that many have trained their eyes not to see.

Siblings in Christ, let me testify: when you spend your life doing work like this, your vision begins to change. You start to see the needs around you more clearly.

Statistics can show the scale of the challenges people face, but they can also distract us from the real lives behind the numbers. What matters most is remembering that every person counted in those statistics is a beloved child of God. Our calling is to truly see them, which means we must listen attentively to their stories.

As you practice this again and again, your vision will change. You start to see more clearly, gradually learning to look at the world with the same kind of compassion and clarity that Jesus did.

There will be plenty of distractions along the way. Perhaps you noticed that when the disciples saw the blind man their first reaction was to turn him into a classroom conversation. They immediately started a theological debate, asking, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"³

² When I led the Mansfield Mission Center's Linda Nix Clinic, my team referred multiple patients to the Community Eye Clinic.

³ John 9:2, RSV

They don't really see him at all. Jesus, however, immediately sees the man. And, he is moved to action.

Jesus restores the man's sight, but in doing so makes clear that physical sight is only part of the story. The man who was born blind becomes the man who sees more and more clearly both physically and spiritually. In contrast the religious authorities who we might expect could easily see a miracle unfolding before them are blind to God's work in their midst.

Friends this is a major reversal. The one who could not see becomes the one who understands. And the ones who claim to see become the ones who are blind.

We often think vision is only about our eyes. In truth, it is also about our hearts.

Think again about Samuel. The whole book of 1 Samuel has been building up to today's scene.

Samuel is an aging prophet with quite the resume. He was clearly the right man for this important job. And yet, even Samuel would need to be reminded that God's vision functions differently.

We are living in a time when many are obsessed with outward appearance. Given this, we cannot hear the news loudly enough or often enough: God does not judge by outward appearance. Instead, God looks at the heart.

Perhaps taken together our Old and New Testament readings provide us with a religious roadmap.

God sees our hearts. God opens our eyes. And God invites us to participate in what comes next.

That invitation matters right now as we enter a new season. Interim time is not simply a placeholder chapter in the story of First Christian Church. Interim ministry is a time of transition when we become attentive to God's work in our midst and begin

imagining who God is inviting us to become. Later it will become a time when we will actively journey toward that new vision.

But let's not rush ahead. Instead, let's begin with where we are. Let's begin with two simple questions.

Question #1: What is our heart? Take a few deep breaths and sit with the question for a few moments.

What is the heart of First Christian Church? What does this community care about most deeply? What has shaped this congregation across the generations? What is the common thread in many stories of how God has shown up and is showing up?

I've been asking, "what is the heart of this congregation?" Your answers begin a conversation that will continue for some time about what matters most at First Christian.

I am still a newcomer, so I won't assume. Instead, I'll keep asking questions and listening, which leads to my second question.

Question #2: What can we see? Take a look around this sacred space at those gathered here today. Think also of those joining us online. Look. Really look.

What can we see? What has God given this congregation eyes to notice that others might overlook? What do we see when we step beyond these doors and into the life of this city? And what do we see in one another, especially the gifts, callings, and possibilities that may still be waiting to be named and nurtured?

You might say this preacher has gone from preaching to meddling. And, perhaps I have. In asking, "what can we see?" I am also inviting you to be frank about who we can see and also who we lack the vision to notice.

Whether you have been here for a few weeks, your entire lifetime, or somewhere in between, what you have seen matters.

It is part of the story we need to hear. And we will only know it if you find the strength to share it in the weeks ahead.

We are journeying together now. And one of the gifts of this interim experience is that it invites us to open our eyes and reminds us to ask God to help us see better.

This whole sermon is a lot. Even the title – Open Hearts, Open Eyes, New Beginnings – asks much of us.

So . . . I want to wrap up with this wisdom, offered as a reassurance: God knows who God is dealing with. God knows who you are. And God knows who we are together. In other words, God knows what is possible.

When Samuel looked at Jesse's sons, he saw a lineup of impressive candidates. God saw something else. God saw a shepherd boy in a field.

When the disciples looked at a blind man, they saw a theological puzzle to be solved. Jesus saw something else. Jesus saw the man for who he really was.

And I believe when now as God looks at this congregation, God does not only see what has been. God sees something else. God sees what can be.

God sees possibilities we have not yet imagined. God sees compassion we have not yet practiced. God sees courage we have not yet discovered.

And then God does something remarkable. God invites us to help bring that future into being.

Siblings in Christ, may we be a church that says yes to that invitation. Not a timid, "yes," expressed with a whisper, but instead a bold, "yes" shouted with one voice.

It is my hope and prayer that we will proclaim our "yes" with open hearts, open eyes, and a shared willingness to step into the new beginnings God has for First Christian Church. Amen.