

Seeing is Believing
March 23, 2014
John 9:1-41

This morning's Scripture reading is one of the longer Gospel readings included in the Revised Common Lectionary. It is included in full because it tells the story of the sixth of seven signs or miracles Jesus performs in John's version of the Gospel. Like so many of Jesus' stories, this one is intended to challenge assumptions.

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."

They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?"

Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered,

"And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Holy One, help us to find our way to believing and to loving You. May our Lenten journey be marked by a commitment to having our eyes opened to your wisdom. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

This morning is all about blindness – the lifelong physical blindness of one man born blind and a bad case of temporary spiritual blindness in a group of religious folks.

Perhaps we should begin with what appears the easier form of blindness: the physical lack of sight. The man born blind has lived his entire life without being able to see his surroundings. If he had hopes that he might someday see, those had likely died off years ago.

Certainly he had never envisioned meeting Jesus, much less being touched and made whole by him. Clearly he must have been confused when he heard Jesus spitting on the ground beside him, perplexed when Jesus' fingers covered his eyes with mud, and unsettled as he made his way to the nearby pool to wash it off. Surely he was amazed when this impromptu incident provided him with the gift of sight.

So . . . what about this seemingly simple story upset the religious folks? Why were they so set on disproving something that seems not only readily apparent, but also life-giving and wonderful? The answer is simple: tradition.

They were responding based on their understanding of how God worked in the world. It was assumed that anything less than

wholeness – any physical disability at all – was evidence of sin. The question wasn't if the blindness was a result of sin, but rather about the details of the sinning – speculation about who had sinned and what sort of sinning led to lifelong blindness. Given this perspective, Jesus' intervention was unthinkable; it is an attempt to undo something God had done.

We may be tempted to dismiss this story and the theology of the religious characters in it as something only applicable to a long ago time and a faraway place. That simply isn't possible because the idea that God punishes not only children for the sins of parents but entire communities for the sins of the people persists to this day.

Remember the times in your lifetime – event in the 21st century – when people who claim to be Christians stood up and spoke about how horrific events that claimed lives and did incredible damage to property were actually God at work judging those communities?

Remember 9/11: Televangelist Jerry Falwell argued that throwing God out of schools and the public square compounded by people living in ways he viewed as immoral helped cause 9/11.¹

Remember Hurricane Katrina's devastation in New Orleans: Megachurch pastor John Hagee called the storm God's judgment for their level of sin, which included planning to host what he called a homosexual parade.²

The religious folks in this morning's reading and the religious leaders I mentioned from our own era were not bad people. I don't think any of them sought to live in ways that were hurtful or hateful. I do, however, recognize that they all share one rather frightening thing in common: a case of spiritual blindness.

Dan Clendenin, founder of Journey with Jesus, puts this problem in perspective:

In the Christian scheme of things, one of the most dangerous spiritual places we can live is in the deluded notion that we are a fully-sighted person. Conversely, the healthiest place to live is not only to acknowledge our spiritual blindness, but also to

¹ Snopes. "Falwell and Above." <<http://www.snopes.com/rumors/falwell.asp>>

² Matt Corley. "Hagee Says Hurricane Katrina Struck New Orleans Because It Was 'Planning A Sinful' 'Homosexual Rally.'" <<http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2008/04/23/22152/hagee-katrina-mccain/>>

recognize that as a good place to live. In acknowledging our blindness, we live in the light . . .³

In other words, it's okay to admit that we all suffer from spiritual blindness at times. The danger is in thinking that we have 20/20 religious vision that allows us to see and know all.

Spiritual blindness comes in varying degrees. Many of us experience moments when we can't see a thing. More often, however, our blindness is partial - manifested in the form of blind spots.

The term blind spot is one we typically associate with driving. When we find ourselves driving an unfamiliar vehicle we are often quite aware of the size and location of the blind spots. However, when we are in the comfort of our own automobiles we often have a false sense of security about just how well we can see everything around us.

Blind spots tend to work in a similar way in our religious experiences. In eras of spiritual complacency we wrongly assume that what we see is all that there is to see. In times of trial, we know all too well that our vision is impaired.

This season – the Lenten Season – is a time for spiritual growth and renewal. It is a time when you have been asked to give something up, and a time when you have been asked to take on something new. Packed into 40 days is an incredible opportunity to focus on your faith.

As you reflect on this morning's Scripture lesson, I encourage you to remember that blindness and sightedness are about belief and unbelief. As those who follow the way of Jesus, be bold when you pray "Lord I believe, help my unbelief."⁴

Amen.

³ Dan Clendenin. "Jesus Spit." <<http://journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20110328JJ.shtml>>

⁴ Mark 9:24