

“I Once Was Blind...”

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1 Samuel 16:1-13

John 9:1-41

Do you know anyone who is blind... not because they can't see, but because they are so attached to their own ways they refuse to see?

In the scripture lesson that Barbara, Joe and Tom read together this morning, Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. But the people who could see all along, were really the ones who were blind. They didn't see the blind man as a fellow human being whom they might help. They wanted to know whether this was a trick. And they were upset that Jesus had broken their religious laws by healing on the Sabbath.

In the chapter before this, Jesus had announced “I am the Light of the World.” And for the rest of that chapter the Pharisees, who were the religious leaders of the day, argued with him. The argument ended with them picking up stones to throw at Jesus for what they considered to be blasphemy. So “Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (8:59). And immediately he met the blind man.

This is a healing story. But it's mostly about light and darkness, blindness and seeing. And there are two kinds of blindness in this story. One is physical blindness, where your eyes literally don't work. That takes only two verses of the story. The other 39 verses deal with the controversy over who Jesus was and what happened to the blind man. Was this a hoax? And who *was* this who healed a man born blind?

The story begins with a genuine question from the disciples: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” At that time people believed that if you suffered in any way, it was because of sin. But how do you make sense of someone who is blind from birth? Is it possible to sin before you are even born? Or was God punishing the parents? Who was to blame for this?

The question assumes the world is organized around sin and punishment. But Jesus didn't see the world that way, and immediately dismissed the question. The man's blindness had nothing to do with sin. Nothing. He was born this way so that God's works could be revealed in him. No matter what shape we enter this world, no matter how different we look or feel from other people, no matter how difficult our lives may be, *we* can reflect God's glory. That's what we're here for.

Of course we want to know why bad things happen. We want reasons so we can reassure ourselves it won't happen to us. And sometimes there *is* a direct connection between our actions and suffering. If someone walks carelessly in front of a moving truck, they can get hit. If a pregnant woman takes drugs, she can damage the fetus. Sometimes parents are responsible for the suffering of their children. But often there is no connection between what people do and how they suffer. Jesus was not interested in assigning blame. He wanted the people to look deeper to see and celebrate God at work.

And so for us. Yes we need to admit our sins and failings. And Lent is traditionally a time to focus on that. But the point is not to beat ourselves up for not being good enough. The point is to pay attention to what God IS doing in our lives. Are we able to respond to God's love and the leading of the spirit? And can we see those who need healing and reach out to them?

Now, some people are cautious when it comes to recognizing the work of God. After Jesus healed the man the neighbors began to ask, is this the same man that we know, or just someone like him? Even when he insisted, "I am the man," they kept asking. And you can't blame them for wondering. When something so unusual happens you want to check the facts. If I were to tell you that I was born blind and was healed, you'd want to ask a few follow up questions.

Even the Pharisees were asking honest questions at first. They couldn't agree among themselves whether Jesus was legitimate or not. But as the story unfolded you see they became increasingly close-minded and blind. They didn't *want* to accept what they heard and saw. And by the end of the story you realize that the Pharisees, who claimed to see, were the ones who were truly blind.

Three times in this story the blind man admitted his ignorance. When the people asked him where the man was who healed him, he answered, "I don't know." (v.12) When the Pharisees asked him whether Jesus was a sinner, he answered, "I don't know." (v. 25) And when Jesus asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" he answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."

But the Pharisees spoke with certainty. They said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." (v. 16). They also said, "We know that this man is a sinner." (v.24). And they closed by questioning the healed man's integrity, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" (v.34). It's like saying, "You have no right to talk to me about that." They didn't *want* to see or understand, so they called the man a sinner and drove him out of their synagogue.

This is spiritual blindness. And it's what Jesus was talking about when he 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." When we think we know, when we think we see, but refuse to recognize what's in front of us, then we are spiritually blind.

Most of us are blind without knowing it. Last year I attended a conference at Princeton Seminary sponsored by two Asian groups of the PCUSA. There were only about two or three non-Asian people there, so the participants felt free to say what was really on their minds. And they talked about white people this and white people that, and mentioned white privilege. I realized that I had been blind to some racial tension. I didn't argue with them or take it personally, but I recognized that their experience of life was different from mine.

White people tend not to notice white privilege. That's because we are not likely to experience insults, disadvantages, or rejection because of our race. There are many things we

just take for granted. When we walk into a store, we are greeted with a smile instead of suspicion. If we win an academic achievement award, or get a promotion on the job, people don't wonder whether we cheated to get it. If we need help, we don't have to worry that people will think we're trying to rob them if we ask for help. If we go for a run, we don't have to worry that the police will think we are running from a crime. That's not the case for everyone. Race is still an issue in this country, even in our little towns, as is fear and prejudice against people who are gay, or in any way different. And when we refuse to see it, we are blind.

Everyone has blind spots, things we don't see or recognize because of our limited experience, or attachment to our own view of the world. What are your blind spots? It's hard to know because if we know them, they are no longer blind spots. The trick is to be able to admit we *may be* blind, and be open to learn something new, or even change. If we can't do that, then we are like the Pharisees.

The Pharisees wanted to protect the system they were comfortable with. They had the power and authority. And when someone came along and challenged their system, showed God working in a new and different way, they didn't want to see it. But the blind man was humble and admitted his lack of knowledge. And he could see Jesus for who he was.

For some reason this reminds me of some of the conversations on the Leonia Listserv these days. For those of you who live out of town, the Listserv is a website where residents and friends can post questions, comments, share information and advertise events. But some people argue endlessly over politics and the fire department, teacher salaries, and other local issues. These are important issues, and it is helpful to know what's going on. But sometimes you get the feeling that people are saying the same thing over and over and people are more interested in defending their point of view than considering other people's concerns and finding a solution to the problem. Come to think of it, this reminds me of national politics as well.

God can work with or heal anyone who knows, even dimly that they are blind. But God can do nothing for those who insist that they see everything clearly. According to Jesus, anyone who claims to see, is still in sin.

After the sermon we will sing the famous hymn "Amazing Grace" with the line, "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." The person who wrote that was a slave trader who had a dramatic conversion experience, where he suddenly realized what he was doing to other human beings. But most of us should probably sing this hymn as a prayer for God to keep opening our eyes, because seeing not a one-time event.

May we pray for God's amazing grace to be with us, and open our eyes to the presence of God in our midst. Amen.