

I Was Blind, But Now I See

Texts: Ephesians 5: 8-14 John 9:1-41

Date: 03/22/20

Our gospel lesson this morning is all about seeing and not seeing, about second chances and redemption, about heaven and believing, about the old world of certainties and managed truth meeting a new world of inexplicable possibility.

In the lesson, weirdly, it's not just the man born blind who can't see. No one can see except for Jesus. The disciples can't see. *They* begin the story by asking Jesus, "Teacher, who sinned that he was born blind, this man, or his parents?"

They think that a physical disability is the result of someone's sinfulness. If the man is blind, then someone must have sinned somewhere along the line, somehow. Maybe it was the man or maybe it was his parents, but someone did.

You might think this is a very strange thing to think, but there are still people today who think that certain diseases are God's curse on the behavior of the people who have them. There are still people who will tell you that, if you'd been living right, some terrible thing wouldn't have happened to you. There are those who will tell you that the corona virus is a curse from God, a sign of the apocalypse, a plague straight from the Bible because of ... well, something they don't like about society, which they happily label as sin.

Strangely, it's always something someone else is doing that is causing the problem, never something they themselves are doing. Someone once wrote that it is a sign of a true prophet that they include themselves in the condemnation, and a sign of a false prophet if they just point fingers. I leave it to you to judge whether that is true or not.

What the disciples see is a blind man, and they immediately think 'disability equals sin.' Jesus corrects that idea right away. He says straight out: "Neither his man nor his parents sinned." He helps his disciples, blinded by the idea that there is some necessary connection between disability and sin, to see that there is no such connection, that the world is not that straightforward, not that easy to read.

Getting sick doesn't mean you're not holy enough, and being healthy doesn't mean you're doing something that got God on your side. Sickness is not connected to sin, and holiness is not connected to health, even if there is a nice alliteration with the s's and the h's, even if there is a natural tendency to see health as a blessing and illness as a curse. Jesus says it doesn't work that way. Something to keep in mind as we go through this time of trial.

So then, what about the other people in the story? How's their vision check-up going?

Well, it's clear that the man born blind doesn't see. At least physically, and at the start. As the story proceeds, we realize not only that he can now see physically, but that he can also see spiritually. The blind man sees Jesus more clearly than anyone else in the story!

Now, as for the Jewish leaders, they don't see clearly at all. All they can see is a law-breaker. All they can see is someone who did the work of healing on the Sabbath. All they can see is someone who used an unclean fluid, spit, to work that healing.

Everything about what Jesus did was unclean and illegal, for Sabbath-breaking. Everything Jesus did was against the strict literal interpretation of the Law. They just can't see past that, so they are blind to what Jesus really did.

They are caught up in the old way of doing things, the established way, the comforting, keep-within-the-boundaries way that gave order to the world they lived in. The rules they follow help them to divide the world into categories of those who fit in, and those who must be kept on the outside. The truth about God that they know is managed truth, that is, God is kept in a box with boundaries and limits. They know how to deal with God, who is predictable, who is orderly, who makes the rules and follows the rules.

Jesus threatens that order, threatens to let God out of the box, threatens them with a wild and irrepressible God who's going to act in unpredictable, almost irresponsible ways that astonish and amaze, a God who works on the Sabbath with unclean spit to heal a man born in sin, or so they think, to see. The truth of this God could never be managed! It's verging on chaos, and it's too much for them.

We disapprove of their disapproval, but that's only because it's their world at stake, not ours. When the church breaks the rules to welcome in the outcast, to lead the way for social equality, to call out exploitative economics, to decry mass incarceration, to demand better stewardship of the world and its resources, the old truths of settled orthodoxy, of market fundamentalism, of oil and gas interests, of for-profit health care, and so much more, leap up to protest. We find it easier to disapprove!

But, in an even deeper way, we too are blind to all Jesus is doing in this story. Do we really know what Jesus did? We might say, "Well, he gave the man born blind his sight." That's true enough, but there's much more to the story than that.

Jesus bends down to the dust of the earth, and using his spit makes mud. With the mud, he makes new eyes for the man.

When I put it that way, I hope you are hearing echoes of the story of the creation of humans in Genesis: *God* created Adam out of the dust of the earth. *Jesus* created new eyes for the man out of the dust of the earth.

Jesus is doing what God did. He is creating something human, some part of a human being, out of the dust on the ground. It is a divine act, an act of God among us.

But the Jewish leaders are blind to it all. That might seem astonishing to you, but what Jesus is doing literally makes no sense to them: he is flipping all the categories upside down, healing on the Sabbath using his unclean spit, so that the unholy things become holy, and the holy things are reinterpreted to mean way more than they ever suspected. Why, it's almost like a new world is struggling to be born. Managed truths are becoming unmanageable.

The crowd is blind, too, at least in part. Some people ask, "Hey, isn't that the blind man who was always here?" And some said, "Yep, that's the guy!" but others said, "Nope, not him. Looks a bit like him, though!" And the text tells us straight out, these were his neighbors who were saying that, and those who had seen him before as a beggar. A blind man, of course, was fully dependent on his neighbors seeing him and responding to his begging.

I guess many of his own neighbors hadn't really seen this blind man, either, hadn't really looked at him enough to be able to tell for sure if this man with the new eyes was really the same fellow. They walked past him every day, but they didn't really see him.

This we understand. Now that corona virus is a real threat, whenever we go out to walk the dog, we notice everyone who's outside in our neighborhood. We see people we've never seen before. We greet them at a distance, making sure they, and we, stay well apart.

But it's not just now. We have all walked downtown and avoided the eye of a homeless person. We could never pick that person out of a police line-up if we were asked to 10 minutes later in the investigation of a crime.

It's easy to understand how a blind man might not recognize his neighbors; but neither is it that hard to understand how the neighbors might not recognize a blind man.

So what are the Jewish leaders going to do about this man? Well, first they question the man, who affirms that he was blind but now can see. Then they question his parents about the facts of the case: Is this your son whom *you say* was born blind? Do you hear the note of doubt in their voices: You *say* he was born blind, but how true is that really?

Then they question the man born blind who can now see again, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

This is their second chance to believe, but they don't. The man says, "I've told you the story already, and you wouldn't listen" – the formerly blind man accuses them of being *deaf* to what Jesus can do, as well as blind! – "Do you want to hear it again so that you can become his disciples?"

"You are *his* disciple, and we are *Moses*' disciples. We know God has spoken through Moses – that is, we know that the Law comes from God – but we don't know where this man comes from."

And they are too blind to see it, so they get lectured by the former blind man: "What an astonishing thing! You have no idea where he comes from, but he opened my eyes. He couldn't have done that if he didn't come from God, so there's your answer, gentlemen."

But they refuse to see that obvious point, so they miss their second chance. They show their additional blindness by sharing in the disciples' mistaken connection between sin and disability: "you were born in sin, so who are you to teach us!"

Unlike God, they cannot see the heart. They judge only by their own outward standards, a literal interpretation of the Law. And so they miss the Messiah. There are none so blind as those who will not see!

Jesus finds the man after the Jewish leaders have kicked him out. Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man. The formerly blind man says, "Who's that? Tell me, and I'll believe in him."

And Jesus says, "You have seen him" – what a great thing to say to a once blind man! – "and, in fact, you're speaking with him right now!"

And the man believed in Jesus. A new world was being born.

All the characters of the story conspire together to show us our own blindness when it comes to God in the world, to what God can do, and is doing. And it shows us a Jesus we can follow, identifying him as the one who can lead us from darkness into light, who can lead us from the old managed truths of a tame God, and into the wild adventure of life with a God who refuses to be put in a box.

Believe in Jesus as the one who can give sight to the blind, and you will really see. Believe in him, and he will come for you in all your sinfulness. He will come for you in all your distress. He will come for you in all your lostness, all your pain, all your sorrow, all your grief.

He will come with second chances, he will come with forgiveness. If you believe in him, he will come. And you will know God as your Mother, the Mother you never really knew, or as

the Father you were estranged from, the Father you are now reconciled to, with whom you are family again.

Call on Jesus to open your eyes, and then believe in him, and he will come to you, he will come while you live, and he will come when you die, and he will take you to himself, to live with him forever.

If you believe, he will open your eyes to a new world of possibilities serving our wild and irrepressible God. So believe, and see!

Amen