

“Darkness into Light IV: Take a Good Look”

The season of Lent tends to be a serious time in the Christian church. It’s the period of six weeks or so during which we prepare ourselves to celebrate Easter, now only three weeks away. During Lent our focus is on Jesus; and this year we’ve been seeing him through the eyes of a number of biblical characters who have close encounters with him. As we give ourselves permission to imagine our way into these stories, more often than not at the very center of them it is our own lives that we find revealed.

Today’s lesson is no exception. It is the story, from John 9, of Jesus healing a man born blind. And it reminds us of the old saying from Will Rogers, comedian and social critic from the 1930’s: “It’s not what we don’t know that hurts; it’s what we know for sure that ain’t so.” By the time the story is done the blind can see and the sighted are blind and all the talk about eyesight turns out to be about insight.

Scholars would tell us that this story has a “chiastic” structure. That’s mostly because the word “chiastic” sounds very impressive and would lead us to suspect that the scholars are smarter than we are. Actually it comes from the Greek letter “chi,” which is written just like our letter X; and if they just told us to think of the letter X we wouldn’t be very impressed and they might have to wonder whether they’d wasted a lot of time and money getting a Ph.D.

But visualizing an X works just fine. There are two movements in this story. The man born blind begins at the lower left and moves to the upper right: from blindness to eyesight to insight. The religious authorities, custodians of the nation’s insight, are the opposite: they begin at the upper left and move toward the lower right: from insight to eyesight to blindness. These two lines cross in the middle. At that intersection is the heart of the story, the controversy around who Jesus is. He tips us off near the beginning of the story when he says, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Some people see it; others don’t... and still others won’t.

Jesus and the disciples are in Jerusalem. As they are walking near the temple, they see a beggar, a man who was born blind. And the disciples ask a theological question based on what they know for sure that ain’t so: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The question is based on the view that disability represents God’s punishment, and is rooted in the wish to believe that people—other people, that is—basically get what they deserve. It’s a tidy little way we have of separating ourselves from those who suffer, and we might call it “blame the victim.” It’s quite popular.

Jesus isn’t buying: nobody sinned. But this man’s circumstance is an opportunity to demonstrate what God is all about: compassion, healing and love. God isn’t into righteous indifference. If sin were the cause of blindness, we’d all be blind.

So Jesus heals the man, using spit and dirt to make mud. After anointing his eyes with muck, Jesus sends the man off to wash in the pool of Siloam, and he comes back seeing. End of story? Hardly: this is just the beginning. What matters most is what it all *means*.

Some onlookers begin to discuss it: what did they see while they were looking on? Wasn't this the guy who begged here every day, the one who was born blind? Some say Yes, some say it's just somebody who looks like him: if you've seen one blind beggar, you've seen them all. Who looks that closely at those people, anyway? He himself says, "I am the man." They ask him how it happened, and he's not entirely clear: some guy named Jesus and mud were involved. But the man who was healed doesn't know where Jesus is or what he looks like... yet.

Enter the religious authorities, arbiters of theological orthodoxy, whose function it is to validate religious experience and tell people what it is that they've seen or not seen. Let the record show that the self-important religious functionaries in their fancy robes come off pretty badly in this story.

They decide, in the words of Arlo Guthrie, to, "... have an investigation about this whole mess of things here." They begin by interrogating the man who claims to have been healed. How did this happen? Through repetition, the man has mercifully learned to abbreviate the story: "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." But since all of this is taking place on the sabbath, some of the authorities immediately conclude that, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." They give the newly sighted man a chance to say what he thinks about Jesus, and he says, tentatively, "He is a prophet."

The authorities don't like that answer, so they decide to continue interviewing people until somebody tells them something more in keeping with what they have already decided. They bring in the parents of the man Jesus healed. But the parents can immediately sense the difference between an investigation and an inquisition, so they want no part of this business of answering questions: "We know that his is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." Gosh, thanks, Mom and Dad.

So the increasingly irritable authorities turn back to the man who was healed, this time giving him much bigger clues about what he is supposed to say: "Give the glory to God! We know that this man [Jesus] is a sinner." The man replies, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." We feel the touching simplicity of that testimony of faith. It moves us still when we sing it in *Amazing Grace*: "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

But the authorities do not see, will not see. They ask again and again, and the man who has been healed is beginning to sense who it is that is really blind now, so he gets a bit sarcastic with 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?"

Back and forth the discussion goes, generating more heat and less light with each exchange. The man who has been healed becomes more and more bold, the authorities

more and more intransigent. The man says, “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.” The authorities respond, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they throw him out of the temple.

But outside the temple he encounters Jesus, who asks him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” The man replies, poignantly, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” Jesus says, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” The man falls on his knees and exclaims, “Lord, I believe.” From blindness to eyesight to insight: the first movement is complete.

But we have yet to finish with the religious leaders. Jesus says in their hearing, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” The authorities challenge him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus replies, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.” Your problem isn’t that you can’t see; it’s that you won’t see. From insight to eyesight to blindness, their movement is complete.

So, how does this story speak to us? I can think of at least two ways. It challenges us to see Jesus, and to take a long look at ourselves.

We are challenged to see Jesus—in whom, for Christians, God is revealed... really *see* him, to take a good look. As Marcus Borg has pointed out, we get so preoccupied with Jesus’ passion as his suffering and death, that we lose sight of Jesus’ passion as his life. What did he do? What did he care about? Whom did he hang out with? To whom did he reach out? When we say that Jesus is the light of the world, what does that light reveal to us?

It reveals to us a God of compassion, as Jesus was compassionate. The Greek word often used to refer to Jesus’ compassion is *splagchnizomai*. Literally it means, “a yearning in the bowels.” It is a very graphic way of illustrating the urgency with which Jesus feels the pain of the world. He spends his time in healing, in preaching good news to the poor, in reaching out to those whom society rejects, including in this instance someone disabled who was assumed to be a sinner.

If our lesson for today is a challenge to see Jesus, to really *see* him, then it is also a challenge to us to care about the things Jesus cares about and embodies: justice, mercy, kindness. We can say in one word what Jesus reveals of God: love. This is not love in the sense of warm fuzzy feelings for our family and friends, but love in the sense of a deliberate seeking of the well-being of others, even at the expense of self. Jesus’ determination to love the unlovely gets him into trouble, but he goes there anyway. In Jesus, God so loved the world. In Jesus, God calls us to love, as well.

But this story also challenges us to take a good long look at ourselves. Like the religious authorities in this story, most of us most of the time function as conclusions in search of documenting evidence, rather than as open minds and hearts in search of new insight. We like to think we’re open to new possibilities of how God might be moving in our lives; but more typically we look for things that agree with our predispositions.

The message here is that God often comes as a surprise: not as one more thing to fit into already busy lives, but as the One to whom to surrender ourselves. God comes to overwhelm us with wonder, to open us up to see as we have never seen before. We are tempted of course to cling to what we're comfortable with, because we are pretty well accommodated to our individual forms of blindness.

In his wonderful film, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Franco Zeffirelli portrays the blind man in this story as fighting the people who bring him to Jesus for healing. "No!" he shouts. "Let me alone!" Suddenly seeing can be alarming.

And so God's newness often comes to us at a point of vulnerability, a place where we know we need healing, a place where we are carrying around old animosities and fixed ways that we cling to. It is a summons, after all, to a new life. And that is disruptive before it is wonderful. As Carlisle Marney once said of the gospel, "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you flinch... and then it will make you free."

Who knows? This year during Lent the summons to meet God in an unexpected place might even involve living more deeply into our own tradition, sharing in a newer, deeper way these precious stories that are so much a part of who we are.

Next week we look at the story of Jesus raising Lazarus. And as one of the UCC's *God is Still Speaking* messages says, "Think it's hard getting up on Sunday morning? Try rising from the dead."

Amen

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