

Sermon on John 9

John could have put it into a single sentence: Jesus cured a blind man. The gospel writer could have dispatched the incident in a simple footnote: on the way Jesus healed a blind man. Instead, John took a whole chapter, forty-one verses, for the narrative. Why did John take so much trouble to expound on one miracle, when the gospels seem to indicate that such cures were a regular occurrence in the ministry of Jesus?

Perhaps it is because this episode reveals some of the opposition that Jesus encountered as he went about preaching and healing. We are familiar with Murphy's Law that "no good deed goes unpunished." In this gospel story a kind act by Jesus is questioned and criticized by the citizens and the authorities. John may be preparing us for the events of Holy Week, explaining how and why the populace and powers were willing to crucify a person for doing good. John is laying the groundwork for events to come.

John may devote so much space to this tale because it may be more than it seems on the surface. This may not be a simple story of a blind man cured. There is the figurative issue of who is blind and who can see. In this chapter Jesus makes the transition from physical sight to spiritual sight, from actual blindness to spiritual blindness. And we, like the Pharisees, still may not get it. The initial encounter raises a question that is still debated and discussed today. Why? How come? Why is a person afflicted? Why does a person suffer? Whose fault is it? Is a disability or disease the consequence of bad behavior? In our scientific age we want answers. We demand logical explanations. We insist on a reasonable rationale for the experiences around us. We expect culpability, a trail of evidence, causality, an accountability that will allow us to understand. Let's get to the bottom of it, trace the steps, examine the course of events. Go to the videotape, get the fingerprints, check for fluids. Who done it? This is one of the few instances in the Bible where a person had a condition from birth. And to the Jewish way of thinking, someone was to blame. Bad situations were attributable to sin.

When we have setbacks or experience failure, we ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" Many associate illness with an errant lifestyle. This is the other side of a theology that is prevalent in many churches today. There is a belief that

the faithful are rewarded with success and health and well-being. It would be a reasonable corollary to conclude that the unsuccessful, the unhealthy and poor have been sinful. If you believe that God favors you when you are good, then tragedy is not just bad luck. It must be because you were bad. In this instance, Jesus introduces an alternative. The blind condition became an opportunity for the power of God to be revealed. What are the ramifications of our conditions? We never know how God may use our situations.

The disciples see the blind man and are unmoved by compassion. Their only response is curiosity. The disciples may even be critical. "Why doesn't he stay out of sight?" When a person is seen to be ailing, there are similar questions: "Why doesn't he get a job? Why doesn't he take better care of

himself? Why doesn't she just stop eating?" Our attitude toward the down and out can be judgmental, condescending, harsh, patronizing. The unfortunate make us uncomfortable, uneasy. Or we can be curious. Those who suffer may be seen as oddities, subject to hypothetical assumptions and guesswork. We want to know more about how they got that way.

The disciples see the blind man as an intellectual exercise. But Jesus sees the sufferer as an object of compassion and care. Can we put aside questions and judgments to see the need? Can we discard our prejudices and preconceptions to address the pain? Forget blame, how they got there, what they might have done better or differently, options and choices they may have mistakenly made, opportunities they missed. Can we put aside our queries over the dynamic and see the hurt that requires repair? Don't regard the foolishness or stupidity or errors in judgment that brought them to this state. See the need. Don't worry as to whose fault it is that they are down and out. Just care. The blind man may have revealed the divine in his disability. There are those who inspire us and instill hope in us through their acceptance and adaptation to their sad situations. Some who suffer can be models of grace and patience in the face of adversity. Those who smile through their pain, who persevere in hope through their setbacks, can be role models. There is a nobility in those who keep the faith, keep their sense of humor, keep their dignity, keep their self-respect in spite of their problems. There is something godly in those who refuse to become embittered, resentful, self-pitying, angry when they are buffeted by tragedy.

The redemptive work of God may be visible in the response to pain and suffering in an individual or community. How do we respond to loss, tragedy, failure? There can be a transformation which comes through crisis. When we are confronted with misfortune, the experience can build character and faith. In those instances God is revealed and celebrated.

Theologians contend that we learn and grow through crisis. Crisis experiences afford opportunities for spiritual discovery. Blindness may be a facilitator of faithfulness, as the blind man was spiritually strengthened and fortified through his infirmity. That becomes a teaching tool for himself and for his community.

But Jesus heals the blind man using a little spit and dirt. Jesus won't get into the "whys". He will not find fault. The outcome can be an opportunity for God to be revealed. The love and power of God can be manifest through the handicap and the healing. The crowd and the authorities are amazed by the recovery of the blind man. And they are unwilling to accept it. They attempt to discredit the cure. "Maybe," they hint, "this wasn't the man who was blind. It could be a look-alike, an impersonator, someone who resembles the blind man." This ploy hints that the touch of Jesus transformed the man. It was more than a matter of seeing or not seeing. Jesus brought changes that were tangible, that made people wonder, "Is this the same person?" If it were merely a physical cure, then the suggestion that there was mistaken identity would be ludicrous. How could anyone suggest that there was an identification error, unless there was some drastic alteration? The touch of Jesus brings personality change, a radical change, that accompanies physical change. You may almost be unrecognizable. Brand new. Different.

When the authorities couldn't get people to doubt the identity of the cured man, they tried to discredit Jesus. They protest that the cure came on the Sabbath, a charge they had leveled against Jesus before. What nerve; what gall; healing on the Sabbath. Clearly a rebel, a lawbreaker. Scandalous. And what were the reactions of the blind man and his family? His parents tried to avoid angering the authorities, but they made a good point. "If you want to know something about our son, just ask him." Be direct. This is good advice for church people, who sometimes prefer to converse in the parking lots and behind backs. Jesus encourages communication that is honest and face-to-face and straightforward.

The onlookers and spectators would not believe their eyes. They were stuck in custom and convention. They were mired in rules and regulations. They nitpicked and groused. And Jesus called them blind. The conversation had suddenly turned from the senses to spiritual, from the sensate to the sacred. Who is blind? And we ask the same question: are we blind?

Those who are blind cannot see God's work, even when it is right under their noses. Their vision is obscured by their rigid regimentation, hampered by their adherence to routine and custom, restricted by their self-importance, disabled by their fear and insecurity, blocked by their pettiness and pessimism and prissiness, handicapped by their judgmental and argumentative attitudes. Jesus identifies the blind as those who cannot acknowledge their sinful conditions—those who are smug and self-satisfied and complacent—the high and mighty, the highfalutin, the holier than thou.

Jesus condemns the arrogance of those who find fault in others without examining themselves; those who criticize others while they ignore their own shortcomings; those who are content with themselves and their sins. The blind are those who will not recognize their neediness. The blind cannot realize the possibilities outside their box, outside their meager perception, outside their control, outside their imaginations. Jesus did not conform to the preconceptions or adhere to their norms, and so they dismissed him. They were blind to the presence of God.

This is the period of Lent. This should be a time of soul-searching and introspection. When we encounter Jesus, when we relate to Jesus, something becomes evident. Something is revealed. Our eyes are opened to what is true, what is real, what is most important, what matters. Jesus illumines and sheds light on our lives that otherwise are lived in the dark. We stumble through life like blind people until we see that God is love, that we are made in God's image, and that serving God is the way to enlightenment.

Sometimes we are blind—blind to our own mistakes, shortcomings, biases and weaknesses; blind to the poverty, sexism and racism around us; blind to the inequities and injustices of our society; blind to our divine nature. Jesus heals our blindness and makes us aware of others. Jesus enables us to see what God values and what makes life valuable. Jesus helps us to see ourselves for who we are and who we can be through the power of the Holy Spirit. "Open our eyes, Lord. We want to see Jesus." We are flawed, inadequate, insufficient, imperfect, sinful. Our God is active: healing, saving, forgiving, calling. Can you see it? Or are you blind?