

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 26, 2017

John 9:1-41

Grace to you and peace...

This story would be comical, if it weren't so tragic.

The sheer inability of so many people to actually talk to each other, to listen to someone else's truth, to allow themselves to be changed by what is taking place right in front of their eyes – the ethos of this story feels so very contemporary.

Each of the characters is so rooted in their own perspective – so sure they are RIGHT – that they will not allow the truth of the Good News to break into their broken places. Jesus brings light and sight, new creation and new life...and the various factions refuse to see it. They are so invested in their own worldview that there is no room for something new.

We are not blind, are we?

The disciples themselves are rooted in the cultural assumption that blindness – or any other illness, disability or calamity – is the consequence of someone's sin. They just want to know who to blame. The man - his circumstance, his identity, his future, are of no concern to them. In their worldview, he deserves his lot in life.

Jesus, on the other hand, is moved with compassion. He sees a man. He sees a circumstance of hardship. And he moves to help. First, Jesus challenges the disciples' assumption – this man is not blind because of sin – he was born blind. But the way the translation is phrased is problematic in itself – as though God

made this man blind just so that God's glory could be revealed. The divine magician, manipulating people's lives for the sake of a good show...what kind of God is that?

It's worth noting that punctuation was a rather late addition to the Greek text – and necessarily an interpretation in itself. Some scholars point out another possible reading:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind. In order 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.”

In other words, God did not *cause* this man's suffering, but rather Jesus is moved to reveal God's work of compassion in this man's life because of God's great love for the world.

But that's really hard to see if you've already made up your mind that this blind man, this beggar, is invisible. For the neighbors, this man is just part of the social background. Who really sees the disabled beggar at the side of the road as a *person*? Would we even recognize them if we suddenly saw them, say, working at the neighborhood coffee shop, or volunteering as a teacher at the English Learning Center, or in any other mainstream capacity that brought them fully into community? Or would we, like the neighbors in the story, argue that no, it's someone else – but they sure do look like that beggar... And if we never spoke to them on the corner, would we even hear them insisting, “It's really me!”?

We are not blind, are we?

The authorities – they're the experts – they're the ones who can tell us the truth about this man. He says he was blind; that Jesus

created for him a whole new life, by molding mud from the earth and putting it on his eyes. By anointing him with dirt and spit and sending him to wash in the pool. New life? New creation? You expect us to believe that? No, the experts will tell us what to believe.

The Pharisees, of course, have their own perspective. Rules are rules, after all. You can't just let people violate the rules. We don't want rule-breakers in our society – they're probably dangerous; a threat to good, law-abiding citizens. We need to keep our people safe. Too bad if that means some people's lives remain unbearable. Security is far more important than compassion. We need to do a background check. Who are this guy's parents, anyway?

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And the parents. Oh, the poor parents! Burdened by the shame of having a disabled child – they know what people say about sin and punishment. They are suspect, close to the margins along with their son, because, after all, it might be their fault. Their friends at the synagogue are all they have – their only link to respectable society. But now their son can see! He can see! But we dare not rejoice in this miracle – we'll risk our own social security. Sorry, son. You're on your own. We only wish we could rejoice over your new life...but it's too scary. It's too hard to see the good news, the hopeful future. After all, you've been blind your whole life, and we've arranged ours. What will our friends say?

Back to the authorities. "Admit it," they say. You're out of compliance here. This is not how things are done. You say you're

a new man – that you were blind but now you see. But you have your place in society, so get back in line. Maybe you've served your time, but we still don't trust you. No, you can't have a job – you are suspect. No, we won't rent to you – we clearly saw that you were begging on the side of the road. And don't think for a moment that you are one of us. Maybe you can see now (but the whole thing is probably some sort of scam). Don't start with the systemic racism thing. How dare you criticize us? This is just how things are. We've taken care of ourselves. Maybe if you worked a little harder you wouldn't be in this predicament.

We are not blind, are we?

Real Good News breaks into broken places. We chose that theme for this season of Lent because so many of us are having a hard time seeing hope and possibility in this midst of a world that seems swirling more and more into chaos and destruction. Social safety nets that we have come to count on are being threatened by those who see the world differently than we do. Progress in becoming more open to people who are different from us is being vilified and ridiculed by those who want to hold on to a world where power and privilege are for affluent white men only. Gains in seeking to care for creation are being turned back by a worldview that believes everything can be commodified and sold for a profit. It's hard to see with eyes of hope and compassion when what we long for looks so very far away. But it's even harder when we hold on to our way of seeing as the only RIGHT way to see.

And still, Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness – and the darkness does not overcome it. The love and compassion of Jesus works as long as the light of

Christ is in the world. The light of Christ breaks into the places of blindness and hopelessness, of fear and despair, creating a future beyond what we can see. And it is the light of Christ that opens our eyes to new ways of seeing.

Jesus saw the need of the man who was born blind and gave him the gift of sight. It took time for the man to make sense of what had happened to him. It took practice for him to repeat his story of healing and hope in the face of resistance and doubt from every corner. And each time he claimed the truth of what Jesus had done for him he could see more and more clearly the power of the one who heals.

He received his sight but didn't know the source. He came to see Jesus first as a prophet, then as his own healer. Later he recognized that Jesus' power had come from God, and finally he came to confess Jesus as Lord, the very presence of God in the flesh. Little by little the man move from sight to insight and he experienced Jesus' saving grace.

So it is for us. By the grace of God Jesus gives us the capacity to see in a new way, beyond the limited views of this world. The light of Christ continues to shine in the darkness, and we, too, reveal the works of God as we share in Christ's work of healing and compassion. As we practice telling the story of God's love in our lives, as we practice looking for good news in broken places, the whole world can learn to see. Thanks be to God.

Amen.