

## Sermon: God is Blind

The first paragraph of a Magazine article entitled, “The Man Born Blind” caused me to think very deeply about preaching on today’s reading in John’s Gospel, the healing, by Jesus, of the man born blind.... The article began, “It happened one too many times. My Seeing Eye dog and I went to church and heard another totally uninspiring homily about John 9, the story of the man born blind. It contained the usual elements: “I knew a blind person who was amazing (climbed Mount Everest, was cheerful all the time); wouldn’t it be awful to be blind?.... Jesus’ healing of the blind man was miraculous; the Pharisees were blind not to recognize Jesus for who he was; and pray that you never act blind (insensitive to the world around you).”

The author of this article, Katherine Schneider, goes on to give some advice and some challenges to all who would preach on today’s passage.... Schneider points out, as do other commentators, that most of the people who are blind whom we meet in the Bible, with the exceptions of Bartimaeus and the man in today’s incident, are not central actors in the stories in which they appear. Rather they tend to be very one-dimensional – objects almost – objects of regret or pity or healing.

In the incident we deal with today the man born blind becomes himself an actor on the stage, a participant in his own healing, an advocate for himself and others and even for Jesus. But this is to get ahead of ourselves - let’s rewind to the beginning....

Please notice, as the incident begins to unfold, that the disciples do not engage with the blind man as they encounter him. You can almost hear the distance between the disciples and the blind man, as they ask Jesus very dispassionately about the situation of this one whom they see as being gravely and greatly afflicted. You can almost sense their unease concerning this individual whom they regard as afflicted. Thus verses 1-2, As he, Jesus, walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus sees the blind man, Jesus sees his need, Jesus sees the isolation foisted on him by society, and Jesus sees who he is; on the other hand the disciples pay no attention whatsoever to the blind man, no attention to the one whom Jesus sees. They are focused on themselves as they attempt to deal with the traditions of their people that had suggested that blindness was a punishment for some sin of the past.

In barely a phrase, Jesus breaks apart this tradition linking sin, especially the sins of parents or grandparents, being manifested in the illness or disability of their children or grandchildren! “Neither this man nor his parents sinned” says Jesus – ending the blame game, the labeling, the categorizing, the stigma, inviting us to recognize the image of God in every person rather than sliding into imagining and practicing a view in which illness, sickness, affliction or disability is in any way linked with prior acts of other people, as an expression of divine displeasure or punishment.

The miracle that is about to happen, the giving of sight to this man who had been born blind, completely upends the worldview of those who linked sin directly with suffering. The later protestations that this cannot possibly be the same man once he is sighted, is the last hurrah of those who hold to this tradition that Jesus is exposing as false. Their point of view, that this lack of sight was due to some sin of the past, means so far as they are concerned, that since his affliction is the result of prior sin, it is unthinkable, impossible that he will ever be able to see. Because the sin was still there, the sin they imagined caused the ailment this man would never see! And yet here he was before them, and before the community, changed, clearly able to see!

## Sermon: God is Blind

The miracle for the blind man masks a certain truth about him that we tend very much to overlook. We read that, “Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.” Was sight restored by the word of Jesus alone? No! Was sight restored by the touch of Jesus and the placing of the mud in his eyes? No! Did Jesus assist the man to the pool of Siloam? No! Did Jesus instruct the disciples to lead him there or guide him there or carry him there? No! Instead we ought to recall and marvel at the strength, the courage, and yes, even the vision of the blind man to get to the Pool of Siloam even in his “blindness”. What a risk he took? Who knows how many obstacles he encountered on the way? Who knows the barriers in his way, the wrong turnings he took? And yet, out of his own strength, nerved by the love and care and attention of Jesus, despite or because of his battle with infirmity, the man born blind was able to see, and the world would never look the same again – not for him, not for Jesus, not for the disciples, not for the community and not for the Pharisees.

Upon first being recognized as a changed person and being questioned by his neighbors the man acknowledges that he is the person previously unsighted - who now sees! “I am the man – I am that blind man!” he insists. Again we might pause to ask ourselves what all he meant when he said to his questioners, “I am the man.” Was he saying he still was the same man, the same person, even after his cure; that in most ways, not too much had changed? Or was he saying that he had believed all along that he was a person, a full, complete person, that all throughout his blindness he had been sure of his own personhood and worth and that it had been other people who had chosen to see him as one greatly diminished? Or was he saying that he was not ashamed of having been blind and of earning his living the best he could by begging and that he would continue to do whatever it took to make his way in life?

It is at this point that rules and regulations, traditions and expectations, accepted and embraced by society encroach for a second time into this story. The man gets dragged in front of the Pharisees. Imagine it, blind from birth and one of the first things he is asked to gaze upon is a group of self-assured, self-absorbed, moralizing religious shysters... And just in case the formerly blind man didn’t realize that this is who this frowning, fretting bunch of folks are; he hears as he has always been able to hear; and he sees for the first time, as they go off on a tangent by embarking upon a treatise of their own creation about observing the Sabbath – the day of rescue and salvation and redemption! Even with the newly sighted man seated or standing right in front of them the Pharisees, rather than rejoice with the man, are focused on ways to bolster their case that none of this could have happened, that there has been no healing, that their view of the moral universe is still intact, that sins of the past cause illness and disability and disease, on the sole basis that someone who was truly from God would never, would never ever, have broken their Sabbath rules.

The writer of the Gospel of John ends this section with a tart statement, “And they were divided.” Maybe just a casual remark reflecting the differing views among the Pharisees? Or just maybe a more profound statement that the Pharisees were divided from this child of Abraham who had just being restored and divided from Jesus who had intervened? Maybe a statement that those who refused to see the evidence of their own “supposedly sighted” eyes were divided from the entire promise and premise of the Jesus event that is stated in the opening verse of the Prologue to the Gospel of John in terms of the Word becoming flesh and living among us, bringing light into the darkness. Light which the darkness could not prevent nor stop nor extinguish nor comprehend – because light in the darkness

## Sermon: God is Blind

vanquishes and vanishes darkness, immediately and fully and gives sight to the blind and changes everything.

“For his sins” the newly sighted man is dragged in front of the furious phalanx of Pharisees a second time. “For his sins” – a simple phrase that we still use, evidence, that to this day, we remain at least partly stuck with the view of the world that Jesus muddled over and changed in the healing of the blind man!

During his continued encounters with the Pharisees, the blind man is ever more able to express his deeper and wider appreciation of what is going on and becomes more assertive in the answers he offers. Tired of defending himself, weary that though now cured of his blindness, he was not seen as healed nor was he being exactly warmly embraced by his community, disappointed that even his own parents are lukewarm in their welcome to his new status, he once again risks being sidelined. Like those Vietnam vets, drafted into an unpopular war, vilified upon their return home, this blind man was still being treated as an object, a curiosity, a thing, one to be prodded, poked and attacked rather than who he was - a child of God and a son of Israel.

After being rejected by his community it is once again Jesus who seeks him out and finds a time and a place to be with him and for him. The response of the newly sighted to this continued welcome and embrace from Jesus is a firm affirmation of faith, “Lord I believe!”

The result of Jesus’ actions in this story, the result of Jesus life and ministry, His death and Resurrection is that God is blind to seeing people in any other way than as beloved! God is blind to all the labels that some impose upon others; God is blind to the labels we choose for ourselves. God is blind to the results of any attempt to discriminate; blind to any divisions caused by every effort by some to categorize others; blind to worldviews that result from all actions intended to demean.

God is blind.... To outward appearance... To what seems to be ... To labels ... To judgment by prejudices. God is blind to borders on a map, to cultural differences, ethnic background, to every human difference and distinction imposed upon anyone. God is blind. As such God sees only the deep, lasting and complete worth of every person, so much so that God was willing to be blinded and to die and to be buried that all might receive grace upon grace, life now and always.

God is blind to all distractions and sees creation, the whole of creation that God loved into being and will love forever. In our ongoing encounter with Jesus, in which we receive hope unfolding may we be open to be blind as God is blind and may we see as God sees – seeing what really matters. Freed to welcome, involve, nurture; freed to welcome, embrace and encounter; freed to walk as partners and friends and community with every person with and to Jesus who has life and love for us all.

God is blind to all but love and in love God sets a Table before us today to feed us and fill us and free us. God invites us to come to this Table, to our Pool of Siloam. This table, the meal set before us, our participation is no ordinary thing, no routine occasion because here Jesus meets you – this is the place of healing, here we can see things as they really are; right here we have the beginning of a new life. We are invited to this holy Table, we are urged and commanded to take and receive, to taste and share, and discover new ways of seeing, new ways of being, new ways of serving, new ways of living, as people touched and welcomed and received by God in the community of all those welcomed and received and blessed by God. Amen.