

“The Delicate Subject of Blindness”

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Lent 4, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Rev. David Denoon
First Congregational Church
Evanston, Illinois

Readings

1 Samuel 16:1–13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8–14; John 9

The scripture reading for this morning is the entire ninth chapter of the gospel of John, all forty-one verses, which describe Jesus’ act of giving sight to a man blind from birth.

We begin with the scene set very simply. Jesus sees a blind man. . . a beggar, you may be sure, since this was the way that the blind, deaf, lame, and enfeebled made their living back then. They lived by the mercy of others and, therefore, by the grace of God.

Now, either he was crying out his personal history from his place, or else the disciples recognized him. For you see, the blind man’s public humiliation as a beggar sparked a theological question from the disciples which was based on their knowledge of the man and which, incidentally, completely missed the meaning of the moment. “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” they ask.

The story of the man born blind can be a troublesome passage. It introduces the author’s joy, that Jesus has provided enlightenment to all the world so that humanity may “see”:

“As long as I am in the world,” Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.”

In the metaphorical, this is a wondrous statement, and eloquent, about Jesus’ purpose among us. But there is something troubling about it is its mundane implications.

I mean, this is a delicate subject, blindness. In fact our treatment of any condition that makes someone different from the norm provides us challenge. People who cannot see or hear, who have difficulty with mobility, or who have suffered some disfigurement, are still people. People developmentally different than most, or those who may have experienced some sort of crisis affecting their brain, are no less human than the rest of us. They are just different.

It became popular a while back to call some of these folk “otherly abled,” or “gifted,” or “special.” But, whatever their situation, people are who they are — sisters and brothers and fathers and mothers — and they are therefore deserving of respect and love.

For indeed these people are *we*. If we have not found ourselves at some time in the place of those our society marks as disabled. . . well, we haven’t long to wait.

For the sins of our youth will catch up with us adults – and our joints will go, or our bodily organs will diminish their capacities; our brains will become confused or our hearts congested. We will long for restoration and rejuvenation, but we know that youth was youth and this is this, and sooner or later everybody suffers for their transgressions.

Or else, it’s our genes. We will just happen to have inherited from some unassuming relative the bit of DNA that makes a body part give out or give way. We didn’t do anything to deserve it; it just is the way we’re made.

But people for ages didn’t understand this (or they refused to): *So why the innocent?* the disciples wondered aloud. *Why should people who have not sinned be born in such lowly estate? Why should children be made to suffer? Whose sin are they paying?*

Jesus’ response to their query ought to be reassuring for us. He said: *Whether or not someone sinned, at least in the case of this man’s blindness, is of no account, since the man as he is is as God made him: the work, and therefore the glory, of God:*

Neither he nor his parents sinned, but he was born blind so that God’s works may be revealed.

In my experiences with those who are afflicted with a society that considers them handicapped, Jesus’ words are true here.

I learned more about myself and my world in a few seconds, one afternoon, thanks to a blind woman, than I had in all my life from all the people I had known who could see. I thought I had just been very diplomatic, to refer to her delicately in a conversation as “unsighted.”

“I hate that word,” she said. “I am not UN anything! I am blind, and I would appreciate it if you would call me that.”

So, nowadays, I call blind people blind.

And I must admit, it *is not* as though they lack anything. Indeed, there are times when I imagine I may actually be *overly* abled, because I will have a tendency, as I think all of us may, to assume that someone who is without one sense or other may be lacking any sense at all. I have been known to shout at folk in wheelchairs, as if they were deaf. I have known others who have guided deaf friends over thresholds by the hand. And still others, who have engaged mentally ill folk as if they had a learning disability.

Undaunted by a generally stupid world, these folk adapt anyway.

Then, on some sort of a lark, Jesus decides to change things up. Note well, this man does not ask to be given sight. Jesus without consulting the man spits on the ground and makes mud, smears it on his eyes, and says, “Go and wash.” And when he does, the man can see.

When the neighbors find out, they fly into a panic. It can be so upsetting for folk who believe they have their world all figured out, to suddenly have something in it shift. They had everything assigned properly, but then Jesus came along and upset the natural order!

And, ah-HA! Now it becomes clear: the issue about the blind man was never a matter of who had sinned to make him blind, as the disciples had thought. It was not even about him having Jesus force him to be able to see, as if he had lacked anything before.

The issue is whether God, the Creator of the natural order, has the right to change the way things are. Jesus by giving sight to a blind man broke established rules. But also by doing so, he made the truth clear about those we have come to call disabled:

The blind, the deaf, those made immobile because their abilities do not include negotiating others’ ways of getting around, or those limited in what they can know or learn, or in the way that they behave because their brains don’t work like most people’s: these people reveal the works of God the same as the rest of us. All of us reveal God’s works, just as we are. Therefore, everyone deserves the rights and respect and opportunity of all human beings.

And Jesus says so just by his action with this once-blind man. The man is a glorious work of God even when he does not see. Jesus is a prophet of God even when he does not speak!

And the prophecy is not only for the community but for the individual. For Jesus has only begun the process of giving this man sight. Now the man has the obligation to complete his new existence. Jesus begins the process of asserting this person’s worthiness to be recognized as a human being, but the one once viewed as less than human must now complete the new picture of reality for those who still believe in the old.

Consider this: no one asks to be healed here, and no one *is* healed. Reality simply shifts, thanks to Jesus. In Revelation, Jesus says, “Behold, I make all things new,” and that saying is given meaning here.

Just by God being present reality has changed, and whole new vistas are opened to those who had not known they were there before.

We grow up, and as we grow, we learn to expect certain things to be possible and certain others to be impossible and, even more, to be unthinkable. Then God gets added to the equation, by the Christ or the Holy Spirit or just by being God. Then, that which we have not expected in our lives becomes actual!

The deepest part of the Christian faith tradition is that we believe in the unbelievable. So belief must not necessarily depend upon the brain, or even the heart. Likewise, seeing doesn’t depend upon eyes, nor hearing upon ears, nor walking upon legs. There are things that are things of the spirit. What is simply depends upon God, not upon our abilities or perceptions.

So, when you come to faith, the experience of it is more actual than actuality, more real than reality. For God is the One who makes *real*; Jesus shows *real* to us, in us.

Think about that, think about how God has come to you and been known by you in your life. Think about how your life has been changed and your reality shifted and some ability enabled by the simple knowledge that God is with you. There must be all sorts of things that you never expected to be able to do, but you can because God has made it possible!

Yes, think about that, meditate upon it. Because if you can, chances are that there, at the heart of it, is your reason for following Jesus and possibly even Christ's reason for calling you.

And if you can't see things that way, then maybe it's time to try and explore the delicate subject of blindness yourself, and see just how blind you really aren't.

Amen.