

Seeing Is Believing

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, April 3, 2011: The Fourth Sunday in Lent.
Based on John 9:1–41.*

For those of you who are counting, today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent. This used to be known as Refreshment Sunday, because it was traditionally a time to relax those Lenten vows and celebrate just a bit. Right at mid-way through Lent, it was a time to lighten up.

One might think that on Refreshment Sunday we would lighten up by having a shorter gospel reading. But, no. It's not your imagination—our gospel readings really have been getting longer in Lent! Today we have a whole chapter of John—this multi-layered story of Jesus healing a man born blind.

Actually, there are several stories of Jesus healing a blind man in the gospels; they vary slightly in the details. Some were healed simply by Jesus' touching their eyes (Mt 9:29 and 20:34). One was healed by Jesus' touching him and spitting on his eyes, but Jesus had to try twice (Mk 8:23). One was healed just because he asked—Jesus didn't even have to touch him. And then the blind man we meet today, who didn't ask, was healed by Jesus' mixing dirt with spit and spreading this mud on his eyes, after which the man washed as instructed in the pool of Siloam.

Some have suggested that denominations were born when these healed blind men met each other. At first they all celebrated together, overjoyed at the miracle of sight Jesus had given them. As they began to tell each other how Jesus had healed them, they of course discovered the differences. As each one thought his way of being healed was "the right way" and better than the others, they divided into spittites and non-spittites, muddites and non-muddites, touchites and non-touchites. Thus, denominations were born. (1)

Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

Actually, the healing part, the miracle—did you notice?—is told in just these two verses. All the rest involves questioning, arguments over theology, threats, interrogations, even a possible excommunication.

It's that way with us, too, isn't it? What do we do when our theology conflicts with our experience?

It's not legal to knead—either bread or dirt and spit—on the Sabbath.

It's not legal to take communion unless you've _____ (fill in the blank).

Who sinned, this man or his parents?

How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?

Who is this guy? How exactly did he heal you?

Why hasn't God healed me when I've prayed so often?

How could God let this happen?

One note about how John uses the word "sin." John understands sin as resisting Jesus. It may help to remember that John wrote right at the time when his community (Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as the son of God) was in conflict with and separating from the other Jewish communities who did not believe the same thing. For John, the language of sight and blindness have to do with openness to the revelation of God in Jesus.

As with most of John, this story operates on both a literal level and a figurative level.

On one level, it is about someone who had been born blind now literally able to see for the first time. I speak as someone who has never been blind, only very nearsighted, which I'm sure came from my own sin of reading too many mysteries under the covers at night with the flashlight. When I finally got contact lenses in the 10th grade, I remember stopping short when I came into school and stared at the crowded hallways in astonishment: people had eyes and noses and mouths and really different haircuts! Then outside after school: trees had individual leaves; they weren't just green clouds! My improvement in sight was life changing. I cannot begin to imagine how it would feel to see light and shadows, colors, people, trees, and your own parents after a lifetime of darkness. The initial response would be confusion. It would take a while for your brain to catch up to your eyes, to learn to process and make sense of all the new visual signals. The neurologist Oliver Sacks says, "One must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person." (2)

On another level, this story is about people who can physically see well enough, but lack the vision and heart to perceive the meaning in what they are seeing. The Pharisees, perfect foils in John's gospel, see with their own eyes the man who used to be blind. They go to great trouble to authenticate his story, even hauling his parents in for questioning. They interrogate the man himself a second time. But what has happened doesn't fit any of their models. A miracle has happened. A sign has been given. Their theology and the faith they hold so dear get in their way of seeing it.

Through all this, the man sticks with what he knows: Jesus healed me.

He's clear about what he doesn't know: I don't know where Jesus went. I don't know where he comes from. I don't know if he's a sinner. What I do know is that I was blind and now I can see; Jesus opened my eyes.

Surely we are not blind, are we?

If you've ever been literally or figuratively in that place of darkness, if you've ever been hungry or thirsty or alone, if you've ever been terrified or weighed down by guilt or crushed by failure; and someone has given you light or food or water; or someone—even a stranger—stood or sat or cried with you, or comforted and reassured you, or forgave you for messing up, then you already know in your body the healing and new life their action brought you.

The disciples, in their curiosity as students, assume that sin is to blame for the man's blindness. Jesus suggests that's the wrong question. The real question is: What might God do in this situation?

What might God be doing in each of our lives? How might God be acting in this community of St. Bart's? How might God be bringing light into the dark places of the world?

Sometimes things get in our way of perceiving what God is doing in us and around us. We may be blinded by busy-ness, even the busy-ness of doing good works. Sorry, can't talk with you, got to finish my sermon. We look past each other and talk past each other. We rush past without noticing the forsythia blooming and the tulips pushing up.

Assumptions and judgments make very effective blinders. When I assume I know your motives and judge you accordingly without first asking and listening, I've closed off an opportunity for real listening and honest conversation that might have felt uncomfortable and confusing at first—like learning to see—but could have opened up new understanding, even a new relationship.

One of the most powerful blocks to seeing is the assurance that we are RIGHT. When I am convinced of my own rightness (and I am, more often than I would like to admit), it is hard if not impossible for me to see that you may be right, too, or that we may both be wrong. Right and wrong also make very effective blinders.

In so many ways, we are capable of refusing to see. But even our own blocks don't stop God's life-giving, saving action.

God is always going about the business of healing and giving life. We may not notice, or we may not see the final result in our lifetime. We can block God's action—temporarily—or we can choose to help out. God can work with even a little bit of openness. The blind man was open enough to follow Jesus' instruction to wash in the pool.

Whatever we do or don't do, God is at work being God, bringing healing and new life, usually in unexpected ways.

Let us who are blind be healed.

(1) Brian Stoffregen Exegetical Notes, *crossmarks.com*

(2) Oliver Sacks, "A Neurologist's Notebook: To See and Not See," *The New Yorker*, May 10, 1993.