

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 26, 2017

Blindness

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. This long story from the Gospel of John is a powerful one about blindness, about healing and restoration, and about Jesus. It is also a story about a community, seeing itself as good and faithful, having their self-perceptions—and their perceptions about others outside their circle—challenged by Jesus in word and deed.

I cannot imagine a life without vision. Being aware of that slowly creeping cataract in my left eye that makes me clean my glasses multiple times a day trying to get rid of that smudge is sometimes annoying and sometimes scary, but it is a mere nuisance compared to the idea of making my way through life in darkness. Most of us played the game of blind man's bluff as children—allowing ourselves to be blindfolded before wandering out into the yard with arms outstretched trying to catch siblings and friends moving around and laughing at our impossible plight. And though it was a point of honor not to cheat, you know some always did, peaking beneath the blindfold at least to see solid ground below. The closest my imagination

came to darkness was while visiting a large cave in Tennessee where, just to thrill the tourists, after a warning the lights were turned off just for a moment in the deepest vaulted room of the cave. It is hard to describe the experience of complete dark with eyes open, but easy to remember—the sounds of people rustling uncomfortably and trying to be silent, the drip of water somewhere, the smell of deep earth. But to be like that for life would be a whole other thing, needing another language that did not include color, or shadow, or relative depth—things our eyes and brains take for granted when we are born sighted.

I wonder if that kind of deep darkness is what was experienced by the man born blind in our gospel story today. What had his life been like and how did he manage to live into adulthood? One thing to notice in this story is that even though he is a central character he is not given a name—just like the woman at the well. His difference—his otherness—renders him unworthy of a name. Right off, though he grabs the passing attention of the disciples as they pop a question to Jesus that carries an underlying assumption—what sin was committed for this man to be blind, either by him or his parents? The disciples did not have the sophisticated knowledge of science and medicine that we have today which is continuously

advancing in its quest to explain the bad things that happen to people. They lived in a time ruled more by supposition and superstition. Yet there is something familiar even today about what they were asking: Whose fault was it? What did that person do to deserve their affliction, suffering, or calamity? Because if I can find out what they did and *not* do it, then that terrible thing will *not* happen to me. It is why when we hear of another's sickness or tragedy we want details, looking for that bad decision or bad karma or bad genes in the story that will surely mean we are exempt from the same fate. This subconscious need to blame another in a time of trial is a defense we use to make ourselves feel safe, and it works—until we have to take a turn becoming the random victim of misfortune.

The idea of blindness especially tends to give sighted people a panicky feeling, and so we make sure to keep our distance, just like in the children's game, trying not to be touched by the blindfolded seeker. Like so many people with any number of what we lump together as *disabilities*, we keep our distance with just the right amount of pity, as if their challenges in life become contagious if we get too close. We rationalize our distance as doing them a favor by staying out of their way, but as you might expect, this was *not* how Jesus worked. Jesus walked right into the life of the man born

blind, and cracked open everyone else's way of seeing—not only by breaking the rules by *touching* him, but by calling him out of his life of otherness and into a life of healing and grace and forgiveness. And look how Jesus did this—no *abracadabra* or sleight of hand this miracle. No instant magic. This transformation took dirt of the earth, the stuff of creation, and spit, and relationship, and a dose of tradition—commanding the blind man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. This was a pool created by fresh water flowing from the Gihon Spring, carried by a tunnel built during the reign of Hezekiah centuries before Jesus was born. Even after the mud and the touch of Jesus, the man could not see until he had come back from his performance of *mikvah*, a ritual cleansing in the pool built in the ancient core of Jerusalem, in the old City of David.

The man born blind received sight for the first time in his life. What a strange and challenging thing that must have been to see with his eyes what had lived all his life in his imagination—how startling the light must have been. The change in him nearly made him unrecognizable to his neighbors, who instead of having a party to celebrate, began to argue about what had happened. In their minds if a man deserved his blindness, how could he also deserve healing, and who was Jesus to cause this to happen? Some of

the Pharisees were so skeptical that they wanted the blind man's identity confirmed by his parents, who seemed to be so stunned and anxious about the whole thing that they begged off, telling the crowd to ask their son, who was old enough to speak for himself, and leave them alone. When the man did speak for himself, it was not what the Pharisees wanted to hear: that *Jesus* was the healer. In their contentious conversation the man sounds exasperated, "Here is an astonishing thing!" he tells them, so astonishing that surely Jesus had to have come from God, because none of them had *ever* heard of anyone being given sight in that way. The Pharisees became so exasperated at having their Sabbath disrupted by this uncooperative nobody that they threw the man out into the street. Sometimes Good News is just too hard to hear, especially when it messes with the way we see the world.

Though the Pharisees resisted the Good News, the man born blind did not. Jesus sought him out when he heard he had been thrown out and revealed himself to the man in a way that he could see clearly. He believed and worshipped Jesus, which would have made a good end to the tale. But wait, there's more: The Pharisees who had rejected Jesus and rejected the man because they thought they knew better, couldn't help themselves from

hanging around and eavesdropping a little. Have you ever won an argument with someone who stomped off to another room pouting that they were done with you, only to have them come back in to crash the conversation with just one or two more points they hadn't thought of before, or sneak around the corner just to see if you are talking about them? That's what the Pharisees remind me of here. They had washed their hands of this healing but now stepped back in when they thought they heard Jesus is calling *them* blind. *If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*

As was his habit, Jesus put the finishing touches on a conversation with a head scratcher—he came into the world so that those that are blind may see and those that see may become blind. He seemed to be reinforcing a teaching that was new to them, that blindness was *not* due to sin. But was he talking only about physical blindness here? I think even the Pharisees understood he was expanding the definition of both blindness and sin. The sin Jesus was talking about comes in the self-indulgent certainty that what we see and already know is all we *need* to know. The sin comes in the way we order the world in our minds—protecting ourselves from exposure or contamination to anything outside our definition of normal. The sin comes

in refusing to be surprised by God—in refusing to consider that God might bring healing to unexpected places in ways beyond what we can ask or imagine. The sin comes in resisting the Good News when it seems to land on someone we might not consider worthy of it.

Paul tells the Ephesians that they should expose everything—even the stuff that is not pretty—to the light, whose fruit is everything that is good and right and true. Sometimes the truth hurts, just like light in the eyes of someone who has lived in darkness for a long time. Working our way towards the truth about ourselves and how we see the world is often a messy business. Sometimes it takes some dirt, and some spit, and a good cleansing wash in the pool of Siloam before we can see and accept the world in a whole new way. This is the astonishing thing: that sometimes to see the redeeming forgiveness and grace of our loving God we need to take a turn putting on the blindfold, and letting ourselves be a little blind. AMEN