

True Sight (John 9:1-41)

Introduction

We are in a short stretch of long readings from John. Last Sunday, I believe, Rev. Fontaine may have talked about the Samaritan woman at the well, and this week the story is about a hubbub amongst townspeople in reaction to a healing done by Jesus.

Healing Blindness

As the story goes, Jesus spits on some earth, rubs it in a blind man's eyes and once the man has followed his instructions and gone to wash, he can see. The description of the healing only lasts for a couple of sentences but the fall out from it goes on and on.

The story might not have been so long, if the townspeople had simply rejoiced and welcomed the man back into the life of the community. You would think that it would be the natural reaction of any community. Instead, the response is hostile and perplexed, which is what makes the story so drawn out. Why are they so resistant?

The Expectation Buster

The Pharisees and townspeople, feel threatened because the restoring of the blind man's vision does not fit into their understanding of how things are supposed to be or how they are supposed to happen.

In their worldview, power and authority can only be exercised by certain approved sources; sources they approve. Who can heal and who can be healed happens only in the way they believe it can happen. And there is no place in their world-view for a wonder worker like Jesus for healing this man.

That is why they spend so much time asking the now seeing man and others to explain how it happened. Maybe he has a look-alike, and two men are being confused. They are trying to explain away the healing of the blind man in a way that will leave their world view unchallenged.

You may have heard it said that the truth of Jesus goes "beyond even religion itself". And today's reading is a good example of this. Jesus doesn't fit the community's religious understanding of what is possible. Instead, his actions show that the power of

God is neither captive nor beholden to the world view or expectations of this or presumably any community, even a religious one.

Perhaps this is another way of saying, as in the story of Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus, that the Holy Spirit blows where it pleases, and you may hear the sound, but you do not know where it is coming from and where it is going."

I think it is a difficult message for us as human beings, because we share with the townspeople a desire for our religion to give us a fixed understanding of the world, where the hand of God at work in the world is predictable. But Jesus does not operate in line with human expectations. He operates in accordance with God's will, and in doing so, he breaks down the fences that we put around God in order to domesticate and tame God to our purposes.

A Just Punishment for Sin

The religious understanding in those days was that the blind man's misfortune must be the result of some previous sin. Even the disciple's impulse when they see the blind man is to ask "Who sinned?"

But Jesus rejects the conventional wisdom and tells them that “Neither the man nor his parents sinned”. Jesus does not seem to be interested in how the man came to be blind or where to assign blame. His interest is in the opportunity that he has to alleviate the man’s suffering and by doing so, give glory to the healing power of God.

This is a very important little piece of scripture for those of us in today’s world who are quick to assume that misfortune must in some way be deserved. Even if religion allows it, we cannot assume that a homeless beggar or welfare recipient must be a person who’s suffering or “blindness” is a result of his own laziness or some other sin; and so, somehow deserved.

This belief that the misfortune or suffering of others must somehow be deserved makes it easier for us to sleep at night. But the truth is that what separates us from the misfortune of others very often cannot be explained away so conveniently.

Crippling misfortune happens to all kinds of people for all kinds of reasons and very often the people who end up helpless and in need are people who are no less committed to being responsible and decent and no more immoral than we are.

They were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time or something happened to them that didn't happen to us that overwhelmed their resources.

My own speculation lead me to believe that what is terrifying for most people is the possibility of becoming the object of other people's pity. It is mortifying to imagine other people walking past us, shaking their heads and saying "What an unfortunate person. He must have some fatal flaw. Maybe he is lazy or not too smart?"

Instead, I think that we prefer to imagine a world in which we can designate some other group or class of people, as the negative examples upon whom we can shower pity, people who are clearly separate from ourselves. And we want this distinction between us and those less fortunate than ourselves to be permanent, so that it doesn't touch us.

And so it comes as a rude shock to us when evidence to the contrary demonstrates that they are not the permanently negative examples we wish them to be. And the only way to maintain a belief in our own superiority is to simply deny the

evidence that does not support our version of how things are. At least that is part of what I think this long story is getting at.

The story then, is not just about physical blindness, it is also about our own blindness, when we choose to believe in a fixed version of reality, when in fact, God may be doing something that falls completely outside the storyline others have set before us.

The Experiential Approach

Jesus and the man who now sees, address reality in a different way. Unlike the authorities and townspeople, who want to make what has happened square with their prior belief.

The blind man who now sees, simply describes what happened to him and doesn't try to shoehorn what happened into the conventional explanations. All he knows is that Jesus put muddy spit on his eyes, told him to go wash it off and now he sees. And so when Jesus identifies himself as Savior, he believes. He believes on the basis of his own personal experience.

What do you See?

I don't think that this story is anti-religion or against our having religious understandings. But I do think that the story encourages us to value our own experience as a corrective to the voices of those who insist that the only things that can happen or can be true are those things that fit into their own version of reality.

What do you see, when you see a minority person sitting in a welfare office? Are you seeing a person you have never seen before, or are you seeing what someone else has told you you are seeing and can expect? What do you see, when you see a minority person harvesting crops in a field? Are you seeing with eyes that are open to discovery and surprise or are you seeing what someone has told you that you are seeing?

When the prophet Samuel goes down the line of Jesse's sons and selects David, he is responding not to outward appearances or to social convention. If he were doing so, he would have immediately selected one of the older sons that Jesse expected him to choose from. But instead, in response to divine insight, he chose the youngest son, the one who had

been out in the field shepherding. He chose someone no-one expected him to choose.

I think that it is very easy to come to the conclusion that becoming a Christian is about replacing our own understandings with a set of religious beliefs that others who are supposed to be wiser, impose on us. And it is true that our religion is focused on a particular story that is intended to help us understand what is and who we are. And yes, scripture is full of stories and teachings and attempts to persuade us.

But when you read the stories closely, you discover that they are not stories designed to take our minds away from us. Quite the opposite. When Jesus tells his stories, his methods are never coercive. He makes his appeal, but then leaves it open for us to ponder and think for ourselves. That is how Jesus operates. What do you see and what do you think?

I guess, that having just come back from Mexico, I would like to share with you what I saw and not what anyone told me to see. I saw many kind and friendly people. Sheryl and I walked around in the city late at night on deserted streets in downtown Merida, a major city, without fear.

We are not under any illusions that Mexico is a perfect place. We have heard that it has big problems and a higher crime rate overall than the United States. And that there is a border immigration problem that needs to be addressed. But our own experience tells us that there are places in Mexico where we are as safe, if not safer than we are at home in the US.

And so my personal experience makes me skeptical when people from South of the Border are represented negatively. I would say, go to Mexico and spend some time with Mexicans and see for yourself, then come back and tell us what saw. We don't have to believe what powerful people tell us to believe. I think that our own experience is more telling, and that that is the Jesus way.