

Seeing and Believing
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Mud and saliva. Light and darkness. Sinner and prophet. Seeing and believing. Sometimes when we read from the Gospel of John we can get all tangled up in the coils of language. We are bombarded with metaphor (so to speak). The deeper we delve, the more each word seems to have a hidden meaning, and we think, “What was **that** all about?” Is it the story of a miraculous, impossible healing? Is it about Jesus challenging religious authorities? Is it a look at the Jewish legal system of the first century? Can we read it with a more modern sensibility of the worth and integrity of people with disabilities? What do you make of this long set of dialogues? What do you hear and what do you see that was not clear to you before?

Our senses some time lead us down long roads that are not particularly productive. I read a joke about Sherlock Holmes recently. (Holmes and Watson seem to be everywhere on TV these days.) *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal and a bottle of wine, they lay down for the night and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend. "Watson, look up and tell me what you see." Watson replied, "I see millions and millions of stars." "What does that tell you?" Watson pondered for a minute.*

"Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is all-powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Why, what does it tell you?" Holmes said, "Watson you idiot, someone has stolen our tent."

Sometimes we are blind to what is going on right in front of us, and in a spiritual sense, we can be blind to the ways “God works are revealed in others,” as Jesus would say.

Anyone who has an interest in theater or playwriting could have a great time with the 9th chapter of the Gospel of John. I once read a commentator’s idea that John the Gospel writer was actually a playwright because of the ways that the stories are constructed. I’ve also read that the Gospel of John was written by a woman, but we’ll save that for another discussion. The story of The Man Born Blind is a wonderful drama with 6 scenes and a huge, diverse cast of characters: disciples, Pharisees, neighbors, parents, Jesus, and the cured man himself. The last two are the ones named “sinners” – one for being born blind and the other for healing on the Sabbath. They are also the pivot point of the story, the ones who really speak and understand, the ones who paint a picture of Christian development. The other characters provide a lot of static in the background, asking a lot of questions, but not developing or changing at all. So picture with your mind’s eye – if you don’t object to another visual metaphor – a stage, with a story of faith about to unfold.

Years ago, when I was in seminary, I was part of a workshop that studied this passage in order to present it in dramatic form in a worship setting. We were all cast for parts in a

disorganized, haphazard way. I happened to get the small role of one of the neighbors: one line, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” What if we looked at this story as casting directors? As in so many biblical narratives, we are asked to find ourselves in the story. Where are we on the stage? Whom would we choose to play? Many would hesitate to presume to play Jesus. Many might go for the part of the Blind Man. It’s a hard part, but loads there to play with, a wonderful character. Someone standing on the sidelines, begging and hopeless, is met by the Light of the World and has his eyes opened. There he is standing blinking in the spotlight, confronted by a series of people with questions. The formerly blind man even gets to quote Amazing Grace: “I was blind, now I see.”

The whole scene was set up with a question – from a disciple who should have known better. “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Now, Jesus does not accept the premise of this question. This blindness is **not** about punishment for sin. It **is** an opportunity for God’s love to work in the world. So many times when we look at other people we see the wrong things and ask the wrong questions. We mistake the symptom for the person. We judge them. Jesus refuses to play the judgment game here. He looks at a blind man, sees him, and wants to heal him. This is risky, because healing means breaking the Sabbath. It will set **him** up for judgment and condemnation. But seeing and healing the blind man is more important. We are learning something, right at the beginning of the scene, about God’s love reaching out to us where we are, before we even ask for healing or help. The love of God recognizes the person under the symptom. And we are called to do the same, to reach out and touch our suffering neighbors, without questions of judgment.

The actual healing is done in a surprisingly “earthy” way, in two sentences: using saliva, Jesus puts mud on the man’s eyes, the man washes in a certain pool of water (which happens to be a source of water for religious rituals at the temple – holy water, so to speak), and the man can see. But Jesus is no longer with the cured man at this point. Jesus had sent him away to be healed. He can see, but he is alone in an overwhelming interrogation session from everyone around him. “Isn’t this the one who used to sit and beg? How were your eyes opened? “Where is he? How can a sinner perform such signs? What do you say about him? What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? and finally, are you trying to teach us? Not a single person asks, “How does it feel to see?” Does the light hurt your eyes? No one says, “I am so happy for you! God has blessed you.”

This poor guy left alone in the middle of all this, can hardly speak at first. He seems kind of slow and simple: “I am the man.” I don’t know.” “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, now I see.” But as time goes by, and maybe as his eyesight and his brain become attuned, he also grows in courage and independence .and eloquence. Finally he is talking back to the council of Pharisees so boldly that they want to throw him out. He says, “here is an amazing thing!...Never before has such a miracle happened...If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” This man’s responses tell of a long journey of insight. It is not an intellectual journey. It is a gut reaction to his experience. First he calls Jesus a man, then a prophet, and now a man from God. It is as though he is seeing more and more clearly the one who has given him sight. Meanwhile, those around him, who never really **saw** him anyway, who are not willing to **see** Jesus, are still asking questions that show us their blindness. They don’t really care what happened to the person in the center. They are busy analyzing what it means for them and their careful system.

The last act of the drama takes place when the man has been driven out of the hostile group and is sought out once more by Jesus. There they are, face to face at last: the blind man who now sees with new insight, and the one who healed and changed him. Does the man begin to recognize

this as the same voice that told him to “Go and wash”? This is the voice, these are the hands, this is the man, the prophet, the Son of Man who can be believed. This is the Light of the world that reveals blindness and sin for what they really are. Where is the sin in the story? It is with those who insist that they can see everything; those who insist that their own limited sight is enough.

This is a passage that was used by the early church in the teaching a liturgy surrounding baptism. It’s easy to see why, with the symbolism of meeting Jesus, going to wash in a pool of holy water, and the growing enlightenment of the newly cured man. In the second century, “enlightenment” was used as a synonym for baptism. Those newly baptized Christians in those early, illegal, threatened churches were meant to identify with that blind man on his journey from blindness to the bold confession that they would make as they rose from the baptismal water: “Lord, I believe.” It was a metaphor for the Christian’s spiritual journey, where people chose response to or rejection of Jesus.

This is a story with “good guys” and “bad guys.” The only two really good guys are the ones called “sinner.” In the eyes of everyone around them the one who heals and the one who needs healing are sinners. When we answer the casting call for this play, we might like the part of the man born blind, the “good guy” who recognizes his healer. But are we naturals for that part? Most of us aren’t outcasts, set apart from our religious community for our sins. We are the insiders. Are we more like the disciples, who frame the problem as one of sin and punishment? Are we the neighbors, curious and speculative, but ultimately uncaring? Are we like the Pharisees, who are so confident, who feel capable of passing judgment on where and when and how God does and does not work? Are we the parents of the blind man, afraid to commit one way or the other? Are we the ones that Jesus speaks to, proclaiming recovery of the sight to those who are blind, and recognition of blindness in those who see?

Every time this drama repeats itself in our own time, we get to try out for a different part. Let me warn you, though, about being one of those who has their eyes opened. As your eyes are opened, you may be drawn to the courage and eloquence of the man in the story. When your eyes are opened, you see what’s wrong with the world, and you may not want to keep quiet about it. When we are awake and aware and attuned to the suffering in the world we feel impelled to act, because awareness with inaction damages us, inside. Another warning: I don’t think that the blind man had a particularly easy life ahead. He had to learn a new way to be in the world. He had to find a new profession, for one thing: I don’t think that begging will work anymore. New vision gives new opportunities and risks. The world may seem less predictable. Can you handle it? That’s what it means to have your eyes touched by the Healer.

Maybe you will want to add a new part to the play: the one standing by who says, “This is wonderful! I am so happy that God has touched you in this way!” The one standing by who is welcoming the outcast, who walks by his or her side as they adjust to a world of discovery. The one who sees the work of God in unexpected places. The one who stands with the formerly blind man and basks in the Light of the World.