

In the Meantime  
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Mary R. Brownlow

A designer some of astronomy's newest and most sophisticated instruments was asked what recent discovery excited him most. He said that new instruments have just revealed that an area of space astronomers previously thought to be strangely dark, has turned out to be filled with stars. These stars did not just appear. They were always there. There is a myopia that allows us to believe only in "the stuff" we see: a fear of the unknown, which is not helpful not only in science, but also for society and self. Through the lens of faith, possibility, and hypothesis, we can become our best selves discovering stars in places seemingly devoid of light.

Today we had another long reading from the Gospel of John – almost a short story or a 3-act play in itself. It is full of code words with heavy multiple meanings like blindness, light, dark, sin, seeing, judgment and believe. It is a story where the Pharisees and the Jews come off rather badly – which is always a red flag to me, a signal that we should carefully be examining our own institutions and assumptions. It involves a healing miracle, but the healing itself almost gets lost in the shuffle, as people engage in a tug of war about the truth and who owns it.

One way to think about this passage is to think about the community for whom it was written. The “3-act play” structure helps us to do this. There is Act One, where Jesus is present, teaching and healing. Then there is Act Two, when he is absent, but very much the subject of discussion. Then there is Act Three, when he returns to meet the healed man face to face. So: Act One is Jesus’ actual lifetime and ministry. Act Two is the in-between time of the Christian community as it makes its way in the world. Act Three is the future, when Jesus will return and claim his own.

And the whole play hangs on the opening question from the disciples: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The question is actually an assumption: a kind of circular thinking that was common in the Jewish tradition, maybe common in many traditions, including many modern Christians. If we call “sin” the thing that causes one to be alienated from God and from the community of God’s people, then a cut-off or excluded person must be sinful. If someone is in jail, they must have done something wrong, right? According to the Torah, no one with a physical deformity could enter the holy Temple, so this blind man was excluded, and could only beg at the gate. And since blindness caused the exclusion, it is just proof of his guilt or moral failure...or maybe that of his parents. We might do the same mental math with someone who is homeless or suffered from addiction.

Jesus does not let this framework stand for even a moment. There is no cause and effect of sin here, only the opportunity for God’s creative work to continue. Jesus sees the blind man as a work in progress, and makes this clear by reminding us of God’s creative act in forming Adam from the mud of the earth. In this very hands-on, physical way, Jesus is making a rebirth possible. With this healing, the man is whole and can be included fully into the religious community.

Except – and now we are in Act Two, the contemporary time of the writer. The man is **not** included in the community. He ends up being expelled from the synagogue – a disciplinary action that was actually instituted in the late first century. Including him would have involved a risky rethink of all their assumptions about moral contamination. The nice clear boundaries will become blurry. The synagogues were already suffering after the Jewish rebellion was crushed by Rome. They felt the heavy hand of God’s judgment as they were driven out of their holy city. They needed to circle the wagons around their old traditions, not open them up to this kind of upheaval. Better to get rid of the evidence, and condemn the man who now sees so clearly. I have a lot of sympathy for people who were so traumatized that they used this survival technique.

This is what it is to live “in the meantime.” We watch all these actors in the play. The neighbors, who are curious, trying to figure out whether and how and when this transformation happen. The man himself, tentative and inarticulate at first, then increasingly bold as he confronts those who would deny his experience. The parents (who had probably suffered years of shame themselves for having a blind child, proof of their own sinfulness) not wanting to rock the boat and get kicked out of the only spiritual home they know. The council of the Pharisees (another anachronism- this was a late first century construct, not that of Jesus’ time) who say they know what they know, especially about sin. Living “in the meantime” is a challenge, because it looks like we are being forced to take sides.

Many of you may have lived a story like this. You may have been judged, not necessarily for a disability, but for something that made you different. And observing the mechanisms of judgment may have given you insight into human nature or into an unjust institution. It does not always make you eager to be accepted, but it makes you question why you should give others authority over you.

In our story, a lot of the judgment seems to be done by the Pharisees in the “in-between” time, quick to judge the healer and the healed one. But Jesus, in his role as Light of the World, makes it clear that shining a light means making a judgment. This happens, not in front of a council, but in the ways we respond to Jesus’ work of being creative and healing and forgiving. Jesus was rubbing out old boundary lines, and so often we react by drawing a new one in fear or anger. In doing so, we pass judgment on ourselves as we find ourselves on the other side of the line from Jesus. The more certain we are of who is in and who is out, the more clear it is that we are blind, according to Jesus. Although there is no sin in being unable to see, because innocent blindness is easily forgiven and healed, that harsh certainty of self-righteousness reveals our sin for all to see.

So that original question of the disciples, and the assumption behind it, has been turned around and upside down. Being excluded is no longer evidence of sin. Quite the contrary: being victimized and shunned now puts a person side by side, right next to that powerful Healer. It is those who participate in excluding that show evidence of sin. And sometimes, sometimes, the light that is shone on their sin brings change. We can see this today, in our “in-between time,” in small and large scale. We see it on the playground, where even children struggle for power and belonging, and adults teach them how to respect each other. We see it when the government of Australia issued a national apology to its indigenous peoples. We see it when clergy in the United States take part in a ritual at Standing Rock repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery, which led to the oppression and murder of so many of the native peoples here.

There is another step we can take now, in the meantime, one that we are challenged to see in this Gospel drama. It would be easy to always gravitate to the part of the blind man, to identify with him as victim. But we should be careful: a persistent need to do this may encourage us to keep redrawing those lines of who's in and who's out, always to our own advantage. We could recognize the Pharisee in each of us. If we vilify and victimize those who vilify and victimize, there is no opportunity for reconciliation, no opportunity for that creative healing. The spiral will continue, and we'll get stuck.

But we have the great good fortune of the good news, the Gospel telling us that even at our worst, we are not capable of killing the love of God, not capable of confining Christ to the tomb or to ancient history. No matter which role you take today in our 3-act play, or whether you are confused and take multiple roles, the good news is that the risen Christ is still shining the light and still erasing the lines. The way is still open to wash our eyes in the pool that enlightened and gives new sight and insight. The voice is still guiding those with newly opened eyes into the loving embrace of God and the surprising communion of all kinds of formerly blind and healed people.

So we should be very wary of saying, "We know" and "We see." By saying, "We see," the first-century religious leaders in conversation with Jesus were revealing their own sin and prejudice in their eagerness to connect sin with the physical blindness of another. Jesus radically reveals their position and turns the tables by saying, "If you were blind, you would not have sin." Suddenly, this blind beggar is shown as one with keen sight and judgment about what (and who) is really important in life, and the metaphorical blindness of the religious leaders is exposed. In this sense, Jesus seeks to proclaim, not only "recovery of sight to the blind," but also the recognition of blindness in the seeing. This story of healing from 2000 years ago continues to challenge us to recognize the ways in which we are blind and can't recognize our blindness — and the ways in which we are wrong about the blindness of others.

Questions about sin, about alienation and exclusion begin and end the story, and they do so to ensure that we are alert to what the story is trying to tell us. To understand it, then, we need to shine some light on what happens in the meantime. We need to see those previously invisible stars, and examine our own assumptions. We do this not for some private knowledge or personal spiritual growth. We do it because the world is in desperate need of the healing hands of those who have been healed. We do it because creation is unfinished, full of opportunities for God's creative work to continue.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro, coming from the Jewish tradition that has been so maligned, speaks wise words about how to live in the here and now. He writes, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

May we find the courage to follow the light. Amen.