

Year A Lent 4 2017 “Turning a blind eye”

John 9: 1-41 Jesus Heals blind man on a Sabbath

So, another gospel story from John, another story of enlightenment this week—of coming to terms with change, through a new way of seeing who Jesus is and what he can do. And at the same time, also a story of refusing to see a new way, as in the case of the religious establishment, their rejecting change, rejecting this new way of perceiving the movement of Jesus in their midst, because it doesn't fall within the parameters of what they consider to be true and right. This is the story of the man who was born blind receiving his sight from Jesus. Another wonderfully written story from John's gospel, full of innuendos and word plays, that keep us on our toes when we hear it.

Now, consider, this is a man, blind from birth, born 2000 or so years ago. There was no CNIB in those days with training programs, seeing eye dogs, white canes, or specialized ophthalmologists. Blind people were destined to a life sentence as a beggar, dependant totally on the charity of their community. And Jesus gives this blind man sight, in the history of humanity, this had never happened before. And this is a key point. Why? Because, this was one of the things that the Messiah would do when he came, according to the prophets Isaiah and Malachi: lepers would be cleansed, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the blind see, and the dead would be raised.

And so, not surprisingly, this healing is the talk of the neighbourhood. But, skepticism runs wild—is this even the same man? Looks like him, but really, blind from birth and now he can see! The once blind man says yes, it is me! How can this be? This sort of thing just doesn't happen! And it's only a matter of time before he's taken to the court of religious officials, a Pharisaical tribunal. The Pharisees were the Jewish religious authorities who were the proud keepers of the law, controllers of the faith & traditions, almost a religious enforcement squad. Three times they try to get to the bottom of this man born blind who now sees business.

First, they question former blind man. He explains, it's pretty simple, really. Last week on the Sabbath, this man Jesus walked by while I was begging on the street. He mixed up some mud, put it on my eyes, told me to wash it off, and when I did, I could see.

You can almost hear the discussion amongst them, trying to figure this out, this guy who did an amazing thing, something that had never been done before, something the prophets said only the Messiah was supposed to be able to do. Couldn't be, they say!

Ah, this happened on a Sabbath. Mixing up potions, healing on a Sabbath, we're not sure who this guy is, but he couldn't possibly be a man of God who had done that. Our men of God know the importance of the propriety of keeping the Sabbath, adhering to the Law of Moses. A real man of God would know better than to heal on a Sabbath. Yet, But who else but God could do something that miraculous? This just doesn't jive, doesn't make sense

So the tribunal, perplexed, asks the once blind man: Who do you think he is?

“Well, duh” he says, “He's got to be a prophet at least!”

“Nope”, they respond, “he can't be a man of God, he's not doing this by the Laws.” So they wonder, “Is this supposedly former blind guy, is he trying to pull a fast one, was he ever really blind?”

And the tribunal calls on his parents to “testify” to their son's so-called blindness. His parents, probably elder folk, are terrified to be called in front of the religious court; and no wonder, for the officials had already decided that anyone who confesses Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Talk about being between a rock and a hard place. If they say it's a miracle and the man who healed their son must be the Messiah, they're essentially excommunicated from the church, which means they would be shunned by, kicked out of their own community. Yet, how can they deny their own son?

This is a challenging one—a tough decision, the kind of decision that we all have to face at some point in our lives. When you are called upon to take a stand, which side do you tend to go to? The safety of the establishment, with those in power—even though you know that's not the way your heart is leaning and there will be repercussions for going against the powerbrokers; or do you stay true to your heart and beliefs, knowing there may be a price to pay for doing so? Or do you find the middle road, and try and appease both sides. That's what the parents in this story did, they took

the middle road: “Yes, that’s our son—yes he was born blind. No, we don’t know who “opened his eyes”. He’s of legal age, ask him.” It’s a very safe response for this couple. But was it the right one? They didn’t support their son out of fear of repercussion, knowing the repercussions for him!

Well, the interview with the parents didn’t get the court the answers they were wanting, so they call the once blind man back & question him again. Reading between the lines, listening for the tone behind his words, we get a sense that the man is exasperated with all this repeated questionng. And he stands his ground, he did not cower, that must have taken a great deal of courage to do that: this was the religious court of his community, they wielded great power! He tells them: “I’ve already told you, isn’t it obvious, why do you need to hear again? You’re not listening; never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God he could do nothing.”

In other words, what more did those Pharisees need to prove who this Jesus was?

And the Pharisees just don’t get it, and become angry. Now their pride gets in the way!

“Who is he, this blind guy, a born sinner, to teach us anything about religious law and the prophets.” And they drive him out of the synagague—out of the Jewish community of his birth, he’s as good as a dead to the community now—and to his parents too, because as a condemned man, they would not be able to associate with him either.

This entire episode challenges the Pharisees and how they follow their laws to the core, to believe that a man blind from birth- a born sinner or why would he be blind- had his eyes supposedly miraculously opened, well what does that mean? They just couldn’t get past it, *they just couldn’t see how this could be, or they didn’t want to see how this could be.* It would turn all their traditions, the functioning of their way of life upside down. It would mean so much would have to change, how they did things, how they thought about things, how they believed, and in whom they believed. Now, changing how you think about things is hard enough, but actually changing how you do things you’ve always done is even harder. This was not just out of the box thinking, but would be out of the box doing! And sometimes it’s easier to stay in the box, the walls may be high and thick, but at least you know what’s inside it, and there is a certain comfort in that. They just couldn’t see it any other way, even when the evidence was right in front of them. Their eyes were closed. What’s that expression? There are none so blind as those who will not see. The irony in this story is not to be missed. The once blind man actually sees Jesus for who he really is, the supposedly enlightened Pharisees, deliberately turn a blind eye to him.

This story, if we have ears to hear, can give us pause, make us think. Have we missed opportunities to grow in faith, to see God’s handiwork, or have Jesus heal us? Or to be in Holy Spirit’s presence because we couldn’t open our eyes to see other possibilities ways of thinking or doing than those that we have been accustomed to? If we are honest, I think we could all answer yes to that one! Even the Pharisees ask Jesus if he thinks they are blind, and Jesus tells them “If you were blind, you would not be guilty. But now that you that you can see, this means that you are still guilty.” Hmm, so much for turning a blind eye!

Now, let’s go back to the blind man for a minute. I’ve been trying to imagine what it might have been like for him. In the dark since birth, living in a hearing world, and suddenly he’s living in the light, having to put a new context to everything he’s now is seeing. He feels the mud going on his sightless eyes, hears a man telling him to wash in the pool. And opens his eyes and the dark has turned to light.

What a miracle, blind since birth, and now he sees—life changing! And his faith grows as he becomes more accustomed to his sight it seems. When first questioned by the court, he says “the man called Jesus” put mud on his eyes. When he’s goes back to court again, he calls Jesus a prophet, a man of God. He stands firm against the tribunal even when threatened with expulsion from the very community that he had to rely on when he was a beggar!

And when he is driven out, Jesus hears about it. Jesus, as a Jew, fully understood what the man had done, the implications of the choice the man made, when he had chosen him, Jesus, over the Pharisees and the security that remaining within the community would have brought him. And what does Jesus do? Jesus went looking for him and found him. Jesus understood, he was there for him.

This part of the story for me is so absolutely wonderful and reassuring. When we move on our faith, make difficult decisions because of our Christian principles and beliefs, when we come out of the box out of our comfort zones and decide to walk and live in the light of Christ, Jesus is there with us.

Jesus knows when we choose to go his way and that going his way isn't always the easy road, there are tough decisions to make, that may well include making changes in our lives. That's when Jesus seeks us out, comes to us, wants to be there for us, to support us, **and he reveals himself to us.**

Jesus asked the once blind man "Do you believe in the Son of Man" The once blind man says, "Tell me who this person is so I can believe in him" and Jesus says "I am he". And the man has yet another epiphany moment, when Jesus tells him that he is the Son of Man, and the once blind man sees yet again, and believes.

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