

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 30, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: 1 Samuel 16: 1-13, Psalm 23; John 9: 1-41

When people know you went through 12 years of Catholic school education, they tend to send you any nun or priest jokes that cross their path. Like the joke about the two nuns ordered to paint a room in the convent, and the last instruction of the Mother Superior is that they must not get even a drop of paint on their habits. After conferring about this for a while, the two nuns decide to lock the door of the room, take off their habits, and paint in their underwear.

In the middle of the project, there comes a knock at the door. "Who is it?", calls one of the nuns. "Blind man," replies a voice from the other side of the door. The two nuns look at each other and shrug, and, deciding that no harm can come from letting a blind man into the room, they open the door. The man walks in,, "Nice underwear, sisters. Where do you want these window blinds?"

St. John shows us a different kind of misunderstanding about a blind man and blindness. In today's gospel we meet a blind man who gets his sight and sighted people who seem to be blind. Jesus and his disciples come upon a man they know to be blind since birth. The disciples look upon him as a object of theological speculation. Without thought of the man's suffering, they ask: "Who sinned to make him blind, his parents or him?, only adding on to the blind man's burden.

Though there is no pause in the text, I wonder if this was one of those times Jesus had to count to ten before answering. First he makes clear that conditions such as blindness are **not** God's punishment for sin and are **not** God's will. Jesus then speaks to his disciples' curiosity that seems more interested in blame but markedly indifferent to the blind man's well being. When Jesus looks upon someone who is suffering, he compassionately asks "What can be done to help him" ... how can the love

and healing of God be revealed.” Above the scene you can almost see the question that Jesus might pose back to his disciples: “Whose blind here? The man with out physical sight or his neighbors and church who can’t see him as another of God’s children worthy of acceptance and kindness?”

After Jesus heals the blindman, the unfolding events seem to be so nonsensical that you keep waiting for a punch line. This must be a joke, right? The man’s neighbors who have walked by him for years don’t seem to recognize him? How can that be? They want to know how he was healed and by whom. He can tell them the “how” but he can only identify the “who” as “the man Jesus.” Astonishingly, no one seems to be celebrating that his man has his vision. Instead there are just questions, suspicions and perhaps fear. We often don’t react to change well, do we?

The villagers take him to their local clergy to get some answers. The Pharisees question the man about the “how” and “who” of his healing. He makes a simply profound statement of faith: “One thing I know, I was blind but now I see.” They bring in his parents to confirm that he really was blind at birth and begin questioning the man again. What becomes blindingly clear is that the Pharisees can’t see beyond the breaking of the Sabbath laws. Making mud is work. You don’t work on the Sabbath. So how can this healing be done by a godly man if he broke the Lord’s commandments? The religious leaders can’t accept that God would work in ways outside their understanding and so there was a price to pay. The former blind man was cast out of the synagogue, maybe even cut off from his family and community.

Ironically, in the upside down ways of God, the one who seems to see the most clearly is the former blind man. As prompted over and over again to explain, *his* understanding of what has happened grows, along with his eagerness to praise God for the miraculous. “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” “What do you

say about the man who opened your eyes?" the Pharisees ask. "He is a prophet."

When questioned again the former blind man says, "*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.*" The man once blind may not know the face of Jesus yet, but he knows Jesus is from God and he himself has been forever changed. He may not be able to explain everything but he can still believe in the truth of what has happened in his life and in the one who made it happen.

Jesus has heard that the once blind man has been dismissed by his community and clergy because of his healing. Jesus seeks out the former blind man and welcomes him into a new community of his followers. The man once blind takes the next step in faith. "*Lord, I believe [you are the Son of Man].*" And he worshiped Jesus." At first the man who gave him sight was just a man named Jesus, then he's a prophet, then he is "from God" and finally he is "Lord." His eyes are opened wide in every sense¹. It didn't make his life easier but he stood in the truth, freedom and love of Jesus, who would never abandon him, even when everyone else did.

The former blind man had a simple faith perhaps but it was open to the mysteries and wonder of God. His eyes were opened to see that God might work in ways not expected or anticipated. The Pharisees considered it their job to be guardians of the tradition, protecting the people from believing in what may not be of God. That is a worthy and important role in any body of believers. But as Barbara Brown Taylor points out: there was a question the Pharisees forgot to ask: "'What if it *is* God and I believe that it is *not*?...' They were so sure of everything — that God did not work on Sundays, that Moses was God's only spokesman, that anyone born blind had to be a sinner and ditto for anyone who broke the Sabbath, that God did not work through sinners, that God did not work on sinners and that furthermore no one could teach them

anything. Their system was a closed one and it worked. It closed Jesus out and it closed them in because they let their fear of being wrong keep them from being in the light.”² — the very light the formerly blind man was looking right at — Jesus.

Each Lent we’re invited to check our eyes of faith. We take our blind spots to our Lord in our confessions, at the communion rail and in our daily Lenten devotions. We take our blind spots to Jesus who requires no referral forms or appointments and welcomes walk-ins, 24 hours a day all day, no waiting.. All you need is to admit that even though you see, you don’t always see God’s will very clearly and sometimes you don’t see other people as Jesus would..... and you think you just might be missing some of the times and ways God shows up. We can count on Jesus to open our eyes to deeper insight.³ The more we walk, listen and watch Jesus, the more he will become the lenses through which we see our world. With Jesus eyes we will better see God’s presence and surprises, more likely recognize those we are to serve and the impossible God wants to make possible through us. So we pray this Lent — Please repeat after me: “Have mercy on me a blind sinner..... and be my vision,..... O Lord of my heart.”

Linda M Alessandri 3/29/14

ENDNOTES

1. Lisa Kenkeremath, “Eyes Wide Open” as posted on www.goodpreacher.com
2. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Willing to Believe” Christian Century March 6, 1996 pg. 259.
3. Portions of this final paragraph were adapted from Janice W. Harms’ sermon “Time for An Eye Exam” as posted on www.goodpreacher.com