

I ONCE COULD SEE, BUT NOW I'M BLIND

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Ephesians: Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

Blindness is one thing that Jesus seemed to have a special gift for addressing, and the gospel writers seem to have a special interest in it as well. They take every opportunity to use the metaphor of blindness to express spiritual acuity. It makes me a bit nervous to tell you the truth.

I have always admired the ability of those who cannot see to compensate with other senses. To use the orientation of sound, and smell, the touch and tapping of a cane to get bearings, the noise and direction of traffic at the corner to determine a safe crossing, the use of a service dog to be an extra pair of eyes, faithfully vigilant.

And I have in recent years been more aware of how the stories of blindness in the Bible are used as examples of spiritual deficiency, an unfortunate application of this image of blindness I'm afraid, because all of the people I know who are blind are remarkably gifted in so many ways, and also so perceptive that whatever they may lack in ocular proficiency is made up in spiritual clarity.

So this story of the man born blind which occupies John's entire 9th chapter, is a bit bracing in its treatment of those who are blind, except that in the end there is a kind of reversal that takes place which is nice to see, so to speak.

The events take place in the days before Jesus' arrest in Jerusalem where he comes across a man who has been blind from birth. His disciples, sounding a bit like eager interns being taught by an experienced attending physician on grand rounds, ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Now you have to understand that in the Judaism of Jesus' day sin and health were *causal* in nature and blindness was understood as a punishment for sin. The only question was whose sin, his or his parents?

You may think this a bit primitive, this slavish attempt to link health and disease, but who of us, when we hear that a person has been diagnosed with lung cancer, has not asked, "Does she smoke?" as if that would explain everything or somehow make the loss more bearable, "You know, she brought it on herself. And we all know that the wages of sin are death."

Who among us, who has faced a serious illness, has not asked "Why me?" looking for some *causal* relationship between our moral life and our health.

The disciples were harsh in their assumptions, but they were also expressing the perspective of every reasonable person in the first century who understood that illness and sin were interrelated and inherently self-explanatory.

Fortunately Jesus dispels the myth of illness and sin, and says that it was neither this man nor his parents who sinned and caused his blindness. A helpful clarification.

If only he had stopped there... But no, he went on. "He was born," Jesus said, "so that God's work might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent

me while it is day; night is coming when no can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Then he took some spit, (you’ll pardon the earthiness I hope) and mixed some saliva and dirt as a kind of poultice to smear on the man’s eyes, and then told him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam with its regenerative waters. And he did, and the blind man was given the gift of sight.

What follows is great writing, a story with wonderful moves and lots of humor. The townsfolk recognize that the blind man can now see and they question first whether it’s really the blind man or not, until he who was blind assures them that you could even put him in a lineup with a dozen other look-alikes and he would still be the same blind man, except now he can see.

This led to a little dust up with the Pharisees who got exercised about the fact that the man had been healed on a Saturday during the Sabbath, and no healing work should ever be performed on the Sabbath.

Things got worse when the Pharisees asked the blind man how he would describe Jesus, and the blind man said that Jesus was a *prophet*. At that point the story describes as much the man’s physical healing as it does his growing theological and spiritual discernment which gets sharper and more focused, more 20/20, while at the same time the Pharisees ability to see clearly declined.

The story twists and turns as the blind man’s parents are called in to testify that their son was blind from birth, but they end up weaseling out of the whole controversy by saying that he’s old enough to speak for himself and they should be left alone. They could see the stickiness of the situation. After all the original question was, “Who sinned? This man or his parents?” But with parents like these, who needs enemies?

In the end the Pharisees are ridiculed by the blind man who gets short tempered with the Pharisees growing blindness, while his perception of their desire to discredit Jesus becomes sharper. In the end, the Pharisees, victimize the victim, and cast the blind man, now sighted, out of the synagogue.

In the last paragraph of the story the blind man and Jesus are reunited after being apart for 27 verses, a long absence for Jesus, and the man makes his profession of faith saying, “Lord I believe,” and he worshipped Jesus.

To which Jesus sums up everything that has happened by saying, “I came into this world... so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” And the Pharisees looked at Jesus as he said this, and they were astonished because they could not see the forest for the trees. They did not understand what he was saying.

It’s a wonderful story, with its several scenes, its principal characters, the blind man, his parents, the Pharisees, the healing, the controversy, and that final saying that seems so counter-intuitive, at least the last part of it. *I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.*

How many times have we sung Amazing Grace in the church? That familiar hymn that borrows from this very text its words, “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” The healing stories of Jesus are always inspiring, and this one no

less so than any other. A man born blind receives sight with a miraculous mixture of Jesus' saliva and some mud. Water of heaven, substance of earth, a healing balm.

But never do we think of those who see becoming blind because of Jesus. I am come, he said, not only to restore sight to the blind, but to make blind those who see; or as Eugene Peterson translates it, "I came into the world so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind."¹

We get it to some extent. The blind man comes to clarity, both physically and spiritually, gains his sight and recognizes Jesus as the Son of God. The Pharisees, on the other hand, who knew the law inside out, the jots and tittles, the 613 commandments of the Torah, the forbidden nature of healing on the Sabbath, the requirements of cereal offering and what requires a spotless lamb and what requires only a pigeon's sacrifice... they went from spiritual and religious clarity to blindness in the story, a fulfillment of Jesus' words, *those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind*. And this strikes a chord with me.

I don't know about you, but over the years I have come to realize that there are many things that I used to be very sure about, but that Jesus has made me see less clearly. And it's not just maturity that has done it.

Some years ago I was asked to be one of several clergy trained to counsel couples who were undergoing genetic counseling. The Hospital of the State University of New York at Stony Brook did amniocentesis on mothers carrying fetuses at risk and counseled with couples who faced difficult childbearing decisions, couples who wanted a child but who were carrying babies with Downs Syndrome, Sickle Cell Anemia, Progeria, Trisomy 21, or other genetic problems, some of which fated those infants to a life of great pain, and early death.

The hospital kept running into Catholic and Protestant and Jewish families who had strong religious beliefs about abortion but who, faced with the challenge of birthing a child who would know too full a measure of suffering and death early in life, were seriously considering the early termination of a pregnancy.

I remember the first time we met with the genetic team. They wanted to learn from us about the faith of the couples they were counseling, and they wanted to train us in what is involved in genetic research, and what decisions these couples were facing. That first time we met, the six clergy on the team described the teachings of their religious traditions on abortion. The Catholics and the Orthodox Rabbi were against it, the Reformed Rabbi hedged a bit, both of us who were Protestants, a Methodist pastor and myself, thought that under certain circumstances including economic limitations, abortion in the case of a sick fetus was a reasonable and ethical choice to make.

Over the several years that we worked together, we all moved on the theological spectrum somewhat, the more we were engaged with the anguish of these couples. We began to see less clearly what the law of our traditions required, as we suffered with the pain of God's people. I didn't change my bottom line belief about abortion, but I came to appreciate what an excruciatingly difficult thing it is to be a parent who is given a God's eye view into the future of a child. And I came to respect those who chose to carry their infants to full term *and* those who terminated their pregnancies.

I once could see very clearly what the right thing to do was, until I rubbed a little spit and some earth together and realized that some things you do, you do on faith, and blindly, trusting that God can sort it out somehow, the good from the bad, the right from the wrong. I once could see but now, not as clearly. *I have come into this world for judgment, Jesus said, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.*

When I was a kid about fifteen years old, when I knew everything, I went to the Youth Triennium at Purdue University, a once-in-three years youth extravaganza put on by the Presbyterian Church, and it was there that I met a fellow by the name of John Walton from Greenville, South Carolina. He didn't look anything like me. Tall, skinny, white kid, a good talker with a smooth Southern drawl. He introduced me to his girlfriend, an expressive, wide-eyed, gum chewing African American girl from Greenville, South Carolina as well. Being from St. Joseph, Missouri, "where Southern hospitality meets Western democracy" as the telephone book says, I was shocked to meet this first ever inter-racial couple.

I took John aside and to my everlasting shame, I said to him that he ought not to be dating this girl. After all the Bible, as I clearly understood it, or better said misunderstood it at the time, taught us that the races were separated from the time of Noah onward, Ham having received the curse of Noah and forever after the races would be separate.² It was the Jim Crow version of the Bible. But I was sure of it and of myself and of the scriptures and what they said.

Who was I to be so clear sighted and so wrong all at once? Needless to say, young John Walton with an "h" in his name, was angry enough to explode, he drew his arm back to give me a punch in the face, and he said something to the effect that I could keep my bigoted Missouri opinions to myself. He dropped his arm, a better man than me, and he and his girlfriend walked away holding hands.

I knew my Bible in those days, I saw things very clearly; and I didn't really know anything, and I couldn't see the nose in front of my face. *I have come into this world for judgment, Jesus said, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.*

Recently in a court case heard by the Permanent Judicial Commission, the highest court, if you will, of the PCUSA, in a case known as Bush vs. the Presbytery of Pittsburgh, that's Randy Bush, pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church, not George Bush, ... the court of the church ruled that you can have hesitations about all kinds of things in your faith if you're being examined to be ordained as a pastor or elder or deacon. You can have doubts about the literalness of the virgin birth, or about the nature of the Trinity. You can question in what way the Bible is the inspired word of God. You can say that you disagree with predestination, or wonder whether it's possible that the world could really be made in six days, and the examining body can hear your reservations and decide about whether or not that departure in belief is so essential to the Reformed faith that it would keep you from being ordained and serving as a leader in the church.

But in this ruling, the court said, there is one thing above all others, you cannot question, one thing on which you cannot swerve, or cross your fingers, or express

reservations. You cannot say that you will be anything but chaste in singleness or anything less than faithful in marriage. It is, by this ruling, the most important thing, the one inviolate thing from which no one in the Presbyterian Church can dissent. About that, the Permanent Judicial Commission is very clear, and sees with unobstructed vision. It seems to me vision impaired, clarity misspoken, confidence over zealous in its expression. To raise this above all other theological and behavioral standards as the sine qua non litmus test of essential Reformed faith and practice is absurd.

I have come into this world for judgment, Jesus said, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.

A few weeks ago the Presbytery of San Francisco voted to ordain Lisa Larges, who declared her reservations about the chastity and fidelity jot and tittle in our Constitution. The Presbytery agreed that she might well have reservations about that, but they were not important enough to keep her from being ordained. That was prior to the PJC ruling, that one cannot vary in allegiance to chastity and fidelity. Lisa Larges is Lesbian, and Lisa is also blind, literally unable to see with her eyes. She preaches like Peter, she prays like Paul. She is one of the most gifted people in our denomination. She has been a candidate under care of San Francisco Presbytery for 22 years while the Presbyterian Church has struggled for enough light by which to see more clearly this issue. This only proves that sometimes those who are blind see better than we who are sighted.

I have come into this world for judgment, Jesus said, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind. Some day soon, I pray God will heal the blindness with which I am afflicted from time to time, and maybe heal the whole church as well so that's its clarity of sight is exposed as blindness and its blindness is transformed into sight.

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¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993. 209

² See Genesis 9.