

Seeing With Jesus

The Rev'd Andrew Van Kirk

Lent 4 (Year A [John 9:1-41])

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

One day years ago I woke up blind. Because of some allergy or infection or something, my eyes had, overnight, sealed themselves shut with eye boogers. (Gross, I know.) When I woke up in the morning, I simply could not open my eyes. I could not see anything. And for a brief period, I could not even figure out what was going on. This was, for a moment, quite terrifying. Eventually, I walked in great darkness to the bathroom, where the magic of steam and warm wet washcloths loosened the seal upon my eyes and behold, I could see again.

All that is to say that I actually have no idea at all what it's like to be actually blind. Certainly not in the way the blind man in our gospel reading was blind — from birth.

I suspect though, that perhaps I do have some experience being blind the way the the Pharisees were blind.

The thing is that if you take a step back, this whole story is meant to tell us that the blind man is the least blind of all the men in the story. This is a disorienting truth. It's one thing for the blind man to see; I'm down with that. But it's another thing, for, as Jesus says at the end, "that those who see may become blind."

But before we get to the blindness Jesus is talking about there, I want to address a few things, including some strange things, about the historical narrative itself, so that, getting that stuff straight, we can talk about this story at the deeper, spiritual level.

First, the story opens with Jesus seeing a blind man. That verb 'see' is important. It's not clear that many people actually saw that blind man. Jump ahead to verse 9: once he's been given his sight, they can't even seem to agree on whether or not he's really the man. Clearly they knew of him, but hadn't really been seeing him enough to know him — in the same way that your or I rarely actually see a panhandler, or a lonely neighbor, or maybe sometimes even a quiet visitor in the back of church.

Once Jesus sees this, the disciples ask a question, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" That sounds terribly insensitive to us, does it not? The idea behind the question is simply that we should not ascribe evil to God, so

we must ascribe it to human sin. There are, in fact, records of rabbinic ruminations about the sorts of prenatal sins that one could commit. I'm not good enough at navigating the rabbinic materials to determine what sort of sins they had in mind, but I do recall while Stephanie was pregnant several incidents involving sudden, severe blows delivered to vital organs by our unborn children. At any rate, my point is the disciples weren't being horrible; they were asking Jesus for his opinion on this matter of contemporary theological debate. And his opinion was that this was a good time for God to get up to something good.

The next strange thing is the thing about the mud made with spit, right? I suppose this is slightly better — maybe — than the time Jesus spit directly in the blind person's eyes in the gospel of Mark. But still. All I can say is that as strange as it is to us, the use of spit on the eyes of those with vision issues is attested in Pliny, Tacitus, Seutonius, and Dio Cassius. Which is to say it wasn't so strange back then; we shouldn't be drawn off-sides by it just because it would cause the immediate suspension of one's medical license today.

Finally, after the man's interrogation by his neighbors, they bring him to the Pharisees, the religious legal scholars in town. This happens in verse 13, and then we then jump ahead 15 verses in our reading — but one of the details skipped over is that this was a Sabbath, which means that Jesus worked (he made mud and treated the blind man) on the Sabbath. And the Pharisees, as always, were upset that Jesus had broken the commandment, the third of the Ten Commandments (so it's a biggie), to do no work on the Sabbath. This is important to help us understand the conflict recorded at the end of the reading.

There at the end, the blind man, who now can see, worships Jesus. And the Pharisees, who have had their eyesight intact the entire time, realize that Jesus considers them either blind, or guilty, or (probably) both.

For seeing people to see, we must have light. When I was in seventh grade we took our "Texas History Trip" down to Austin and San Antonio, which included a stop at Longhorn Cavern State Park. There was a spot on the tour where we were all lined up against the cavern wall and the tour guide turned out the lights. "This is absolute darkness," she told us. "No light at all makes it this deep into the cavern. Your eyes will never adjust. In fact, if you stayed in absolute darkness long enough, you would go blind."

Absolute darkness was really dark. And there was simply no way we could see. The problem wasn't with us, the problem was that there was no light. We weren't blind.

Just as seeing people require light to actually see, spiritual vision requires light too. The other characters in this story could not have been in spiritual darkness. Look at what Jesus says in verse two, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it

is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” He’s explaining that he is to our spiritual vision what the lights in the cavern were to our physical vision. Jesus is saying, I’m here, the light is on. Which means if the Pharisees in this story can’t see spiritually what God is up to, then they must be blind.

Blindness is just the state of not being able to see when there’s light.

While physical blindness is fairly obvious, spiritual blindness can be slightly harder to diagnose. So I want to show you two signs of spiritual blindness; maybe, like me, you’ll find these humbling, because maybe you’ve suffered these symptoms before in your life too.

The first sign of spiritual blindness is that you can’t see individuals, but instead categorize people. The Pharisees don’t know much about Jesus. They even say, in verse 29, “We don’t know where he comes from.” They put him in the spiritual equivalent of the dreaded unrecognized number on our cell phones. They went ahead and hit hangup.

But we can see their spiritual blindness most clearly when it comes to man born blind. They have a neat category for him that explains his past, “born in utter sin” And they all too easily assign him to a new category, “cast out.”

We are perhaps more sympathetic to the blind today. But others who suffer are pretty easily categorized, are they not? Homeless man walking his bicycle with his possessions in plastic bags: strung out, addicted, mentally ill. Pregnant single woman with multiple kids: slutty. Juvenile boys in prison, particularly African American boys: gang members, thugs. HIV positive: gay, or drug user. Obese person using motorized cart at Wal-Mart: lazy, glutton, poor. Hispanic: illegal.

That, friends, is spiritual blindness. The symptom is an inability to see the human beings in front of us, and its place, to sense only the statistical category of ne’er-do-well to which we assume they belong.

When we find ourselves suffering this sort of blindness, we need Jesus to heal us so that we can see these same people in his light, so that we can see them as he would see them. Even if we’re right about them, even if they are as horrible as we imagine... Jesus loves them.

I was reading recently about the great catholic social activist Dorothy Day, who spent much of her life living in community with those she was trying to serve. She found she got the most out of the most difficult — the addicts who wouldn’t quit; the mean; the backstabbers. It was in trying to love those that she felt she learned the most about what it was like to love Jesus. Dorothy Day could see.

So, the first symptom of spiritual blindness is that you don't see individuals, but instead categorize people.

The second sign of spiritual blindness is that you can't see what was done, but are instead exhaust yourself worrying about the how. Everybody, but especially the Pharisees, want to know how Jesus opened the man's eyes. Not in the sense of the mud and the washing, but how Jesus did it. For the Pharisees in particular, they couldn't figure out how what they considered a sin (working on the sabbath) could have such amazing healing effects.

Do you have any idea how confusing it is for religious people when God starts acting outside of the rules we've put in place? It's like sneaking in and moving the furniture in a blind person's room. One of the things you must never do around blind people is move the furniture, because the blind memorize where all that stuff is spatially, and so if you move stuff around, they will run into it, and potentially hurt themselves.

Jesus here, has moved the Sabbath ottoman over just a touch. And these blind Pharisees trip right over it. And they say, "Who would do such a thing! They must up to no good. The ottoman looks better there."

But Jesus isn't being mean — the Pharisees aren't supposed to be blind! They're supposed to see the Sabbath ottoman moved slightly, and see the man born blind who now can see, and see, "Oh, that makes a lot of sense really."

The blind man tries to explain this..."Why this is an amazing thing! You do now know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshipper of God and does his will, God listens to him...If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

Do the Pharisees say, "Well, when you put it like that..." No! They say, "Shut up. Get out of here. Our shins hurt from running into that ottoman."

Episcopal churches are really good doing this to Baptist churches — you know, the sort where thousands of people are coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. "You're church looks like a theatre and your music sounds like a rock band and you're theology is stupid and there are too many Republicans." We just ignore the what to condemn the how.

12 steppers are really good at doing this to people who beat addiction any other way: you did it wrong. You have to follow the steps. Ignore the what, condemn the how.

Christians sometimes do this to other Christians who experience the power of God in their life. "Oh, you think God orchestrated all that? Couldn't it have just been a

coincidence?”

I remember this one time my friend Deng, a priest from South Sudan, was telling us a miracle story. Deng has seen lots of miracles — resurrections, healings, Bible-story sounding stuff. He was telling us about this time a woman’s arm swelled to three times its normal size, and Bishop Nathaniel came and prayed with her and Deng watched her arm be miraculously healed. I’m not doing a good job telling the miracle story, but that’s not the story I want to tell. My story is about the telling of the story. Deng was sharing it with a little group of us. One of our number was a med student. And as soon as Deng started to describe the arm, you could see the look in this med student’s eyes change. He was trying to work out what had “really” happened; what the medical cause was of this sudden severe, but temporary swelling. He was working out the how; instead of hearing the story about what God had done.

How isn’t itself a bad question; but if it blinds us to the what — then we’re in trouble. Because Jesus seems perfectly willing to do whats with hows we do not expect. The greatest example of this is our salvation. What did Christ do? He saved us and restored our relationship to God. How did he do it? The Cross.

Most of the Jews of Jesus’ day, and many, many people since, have been blind to that wonderful what because they were scandalized by the how.

That’s the second sign of blindness, can’t see the what, scandalized by the how. And it often goes with the first, too busy categorizing people to see who they really are.

The good news is, even if you have been spiritually blind from birth, you don’t have to be any longer. Jesus is both the healer of blindness and the light of the world. When you find yourself seeing darkness, pause, pray, and imagine that situation as the Son of God sees it. Close your eyes and picture that person bathed in the light of Christ’s love. Say, “Lord, help me.” You really can do this — you can come back to Jesus seeing; Jesus can make it so.

May we at St. Andrew’s be the sort of people where our neighbors say, “Are they the same people? How is it that they see?” Beat blindness my brothers and sisters. May your eyes be open to the light of the world. Amen.