

Seeing Clearly

John 9:1-41

The gospel lesson this morning is itself a narrative sermon which John preached to Christians living near the end of the first century. Though based upon an incident when Jesus healed a blind man, the story is about more than healing. It is about Jesus as the light of the world and the impact of his light touching our lives. Listen for the Word of God.

9:1-2

As he walked along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth.

His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The disciples are simply operating out of the theological convictions of the day which believed sin caused sickness. If adults became sick it was because of some sin. If a child was born with some affliction, it could well be the results of parents' or grandparents' sin. But some rabbis went so far as to teach that an infant could sin while still in the mother's womb. The disciples saw a blind man and came to the conclusion that someone sinned.

Jesus steps beyond a question of cause to one of purpose. Though it may be possible to see a connection between one's sin and one's suffering, it is not possible to move in the opposite direction. You cannot assume that because someone is suffering it is because they have committed some hidden sin. First of all, God does not operate that way, playing a cosmic game of "Gotcha!" God's time is spent trying to redeem our lives from the tangles they have accrued, not punish us for them. Listen to how Jesus responds to them:

9:3

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Now be careful how you hear that. This is not some simplistic remark about pain and suffering existing to reveal God's power and glory. Rather, Jesus is saying that God is at work to overcome the things which haunt us. And so Jesus continues:

9:4-7a

"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."

Jesus had said that of himself at the pool of Siloam, one chapter earlier, during the feast of tabernacles. Now Jesus reveals the power of his light.

When Jesus had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "sent").

Just as God had taken the initiative in the garden, scooping up moist clay to fashion that first Adam, so Jesus, completely unbidden, takes the initiative with this blind man. Scooping some dirt into the palm of his hand, and adding his own saliva, Jesus kneads it into a healing paste, clay, which will, when washed away in the pool named "sent," not only heal the man of his blindness, but which will also confirm Jesus as the one "sent" to be the light of the world, to do the work of the One who sent him.

9:7b

we read: ... **[the man] went and washed and came back able to see.**

But now the lesson turns to addressing what it means to be touched by Jesus, especially when living in a world which prefers darkness to light.

9:8-10

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"

"Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him."

He kept saying, "I am the man."

There are two things here which need our attention if we are to grasp the depth of John's meaning. First, thus far the man had been a bystander, and really hadn't a clue as to how this had all taken place, much less why. In much the same way Jesus had initiated the conversation with a startled Samaritan woman from last week's lesson, Jesus has chosen him as an occasion to reveal himself as the light of the world. All the man knows is Jesus' name and what Jesus did in the process of healing him. The man has just begun to see, he does not yet comprehend who Jesus is.

Second, the moment the man is healed, he becomes a source of light himself—light which itself creates division within his world. The neighbors who watched him grow up, those who have walked by him begging day by day, are simply not prepared to recognize him in a new context. When they continue to press him as to how it has happened, all he can do is repeat Jesus' name and tell them what Jesus did with the clay. The neighbors are first miffed, then confused. We read:

9:10-14, 16-17

They asked him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"

He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.'

Then I went and washed and received my sight."

They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

Armed only with his newly given sight and the name of the one who gave it to him, the man is becoming light himself. Yet his insistence upon it is becoming a bit of an embarrassment to his neighbors. Convinced he was losing it, and in need of theological counsel: We read:

"They brought him to the Pharisees....

Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath."

But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?"

As they were divided, they asked the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened."

Here is the beginning of the Sabbath controversy. After all, the Pharisees thought, the man's life was not in danger; Jesus should have waited one more day for this miracle to satisfy the Sabbath requirements. The Pharisees come to the conclusion that Jesus has broken the law; he is a sinner! "But look at what he has done!" cry at least some among them? And so the question emerges: "Is this man a sinner or is this man from God?"

Divided among themselves the Pharisees continue to press the man to solve what is essentially their own problem. Yet, it is quickly becoming one for him as well. What began as a simple moment of experience is beginning to grow into something more. Unable to deny his own sight, and forced to respond to the religious authorities' questions, the man begins looking beyond the miracle to what it means. Like the Samaritan woman before him he proclaims Jesus to be a prophet.

That is more light than the religious leaders are ready to consider. Like his neighbors they prefer believing he was never blind and that no miracle has occurred. We read:

9:18-23

...they called his parents and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"

His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."

His parents said this because they were afraid of the leaders; for they had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

The parents answer their three questions: This is their son. He was born blind. They do not know how it is he now sees. But under religious intimidation of these authorities they say one thing more than they were asked to tell: "nor do we know who opened his eyes." They deny even knowing Jesus' name out of fear that they will be expelled from the synagogue. You see, by the time John's gospel was written, Jews who had come to accept Jesus as the Messiah were being driven out of the synagogue. Unwilling to risk such ostracizing simply because their son had the bad luck to be touched by this man from God only knows where, they take refuge in the fact that he is old enough to speak for himself. If he wants to put himself at risk, let him. They will not risk it on his behalf. Frankly, it is beginning to seem to them that things would have been better if Jesus had not healed him—at least, better for them.

The division becomes more personal. Being touched by Jesus can not only set us over against those with whom we work or play, but also against our very household—mother and father, sister and brother. This too was the experience of the early church, and John is using the story to remind all who will hear that such abuse is part and parcel of belonging to the light in a world which prefers darkness. We read:

9:24-25

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Tell the truth! We know that this man is a sinner."

He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

What up to now could have simply been labeled "fortuitous" has now been driven into its full revelation. The story of how light shines upon one who has been sitting in darkness, has now turned into a story which reveals those who have thought themselves enlightened to actually be blind.

Having named Jesus a sinner, the interrogation continues, becoming ever more hostile. Before it is over they will have labeled the healed man a sinner as well. As the religious leaders do so, they actually make fools of themselves. Not only do they end up vilifying their chief witness, they retreat into tradition and reveal just how unable they are to see all that is taking place around them. We read:

9:28-31

... they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.

We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.

We are listening to the violent argument between Christians and Jews of the late first century, the continuing arguments between disciples of Jesus and the disciples of Moses. And the question then is what it has continued to be even to this day: "Where does this man come from?" Who is he? Is this the power of God or some other force? Is this light or darkness?

By now the man has moved from his initial bewilderment, through his conviction that Jesus was at least a prophet of God to even greater resolve. No longer fearful of religious leaders who are in many ways far more blind than he was when the day began, he falls back on the irrefutable logic of his experience, saying:

9:32-33

"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."

Trapped by their own logic, the authorities can do nothing but further discredit their witness:

9:34-38

... "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."

Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

Absent for twenty-two verses, Jesus returns, not only to comfort the man, but to reveal himself even more fully. John is telling any who will listen not to fear division and rejection, but to follow the blind man's example. For as they do, Jesus

will seek them out, not only to comfort them, but to bring them more deeply into faith and life.

He had begun the day sitting in darkness, oblivious to what was about to happen and what it would mean for the rest of his life. He had been touched by God in the flesh, revealing not only God's power, but God's continuing desire to give us life. Refusing to deny his experience, he had found himself pitted first against neighbors, then household and, finally, the religious authorities themselves. Doing so, he had become a sign of the Light. He simply refused to deny what had happened to him and who it was who had touched him. As he clung to that, he ever increasingly witnessed to the light, until he became light himself. Now he meets the one he first only knew by name—the one who healed him—and in this moment of further revelation calls him "Lord!," and worships him.

John wants us to hear this at more than one level. On the face of the story he is telling us that Jesus returned to comfort the man he had healed, and in doing so, further revealed himself as the Son of Man—the one God has sent as both savior and judge of the world.

But at a second level John is speaking to a church which had not seen Jesus, yet had claimed him as Lord and Savior, at the cost of rejection by neighbors and families, expulsion from synagogue, and at times, even the cost of their lives. Like the healed man, they too had been taunted with the recurring question: "Where is he, this risen Lord?" John is telling them that though they are living between the time of Jesus' resurrection and his final coming, he will come to comfort them, and at his final coming, their loyalty and devotion will be welcomed for what it is—a sign of the light.

Finally, John is speaking to you and to me, to all who have claimed Jesus' name, who without having seen him, seek to love, serve, and bear witness to him. John is telling us that, as we live our lives out of such commitment, we too will experience the light that comes from Jesus' touch. As we bear witness to that touch, we too will experience the divisions which come from his light. But most of all, he will come to us in those moments, revealing himself to us. We too will see him for who he really is, and in that vision find life.

Today, when we gather around the font to baptize Madeleine, we will be immersing her into the story of all that God is up to in Jesus Christ. She will be sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. Whatever she does in life—wherever she goes—she will go as a witness to the light of Christ. And that's why her family's promises—and your promises—to nurture her in the faith are so important, as we promise to nurture her in the faith that she may see clearly to follow the One in whose name she is baptized.