

Lent 4 A
John 9:1-41
March 2, 2008

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Notes not for publication

"Surely we are not blind, are we?" The question drips with irony. For in the story we've just heard, it's the ones who can't see who don't know they can't see. They are blind to their own blindness. John's gospel today lays out different levels of sight, different levels of blindness, and shows us how we so easily get the two mixed up.

"In Richard Powers' novel, *The Echo Maker*, a young man suffers a brain injury in an auto accident and is afflicted with Capgras syndrome. When he wakes from a coma, he can see and even recognize family members and friends, but he takes them for impostors. As the delusional fellow tries to learn why he's surrounded by phone doubles of everyone once familiar to him, and while his sister and a therapist try to help him see reality, readers find themselves sliding into the baffling blindness that affects everyone in the story and keeps them from ever seeing or knowing the truth of their own lives, much less anyone else's ("Living By the Word," Frederick Niedner, *The Christian Century*, 2/26/08, p. 20).

It is so hard for us to see what we do not already see. There are places where we do not want to look, afraid of what we will see. It reminds me of driving to Scudder the other day to pick up my kids. As I pulled up into the circle drive, I saw a bench full of kindergarteners, sitting there, all looking for their rides, all wearing sunglasses. On nice days, they get a face full of sun at 3:00 in the afternoon. All of us learned as kids not to look directly at the sun. But now we know that the reduction in the ozone layer lets ultraviolet rays through that can burn not only our skin, but also our eyes. Scientists tell us that our kids, who will live their whole lives with this risk, need to protect their eyes. The energy in the sun is too powerful for us.

At the outset of this story, Jesus describes himself as the light of the world, and his healing action as a revelation of the power of God. And that's an event that folks either have to decide to see or not. Seeing the Jesus event, really seeing it, is not going to be business as usual, not just a nice little interesting fact to know alongside all the other things we know. It's also not going to be something that makes you more special than anybody else. Seeing Jesus is to have your vision reframed completely, like going from black and white to color, or like those people who get glasses and find out for the first time that trees have leaves that are distinct from each other. To look into the light of the world is to get your corneas burned and then to have them heal up in a new way.

The Pharisees who hear about the transformation of the man born blind are people who refuse to see. They are confronted with an occurrence, which, in the context of the story, had never happened before. They know who this blind man is—he stumbles around and begs on the corner—and they believe that in his blindness he is paying the price for some terrible thing his parents or grandparents did. Maybe they even laugh at him; certainly they avoid him. They look upon him, and they think they know who he is. The Pharisees also look at Jesus, and they think they know who he is, too. He has arrived on the scene declaring things about himself that cannot be true, that he is the Son of the Father and the light of the world. He's questioned their interpretation of the Law, questioned their authority, and has won the hearts of many with his message. They can clearly see that he is dangerous and must be stopped.

And at least in the first half of that statement, they're right. Jesus is dangerous to them and the status quo they've created in their minds to make things make sense and to protect themselves. They've seen that part correctly. So they look at the man, formerly blind but now walking around, clear-eyed, suddenly their equal in ability, his curse evaporated—and they say, who in the world is this? Looks like the blind beggar guy, but it cannot be. They have no framework for processing this new information. This is how the world works—you sin, you break the law, and you get punished, and that's what you deserve, that's just how it is. If this guy is blind and wandering around in the street, it's for a reason, and there's no way to change that.

It reminds me some of how I felt before I left on my trip to the Holy Land. I knew we would be visiting with people and studying the conflict, and as I read history in preparation for it, I just got more and more depressed. I became more and more convinced that these people must just hate each other in the same way the Hutus and Tutsis hate each other, just like the Serbs and the Croats, and they're just doomed to kill each other. You can't find a solution when each side wants something mutually exclusive of the other. That's the framework I took with me, and heaven knows that the events of the past week in Gaza support that view.

Sometimes, though, we use this kind of fatalistic conclusion to keep from feeling worried or disturbed for very long. I look, I see a hard, tragic situation, and I draw a conclusion that makes sense, and I can box it up neatly, store it on a shelf, and be secretly grateful that's not me. And from then on, that's the lens through which I view whatever else might happen. We do this to manage the weight of foreign crises, which

are too numerous to count on TV. And we do it to give order and meaning to suffering that happens much closer to home, in communities besieged by poverty and violence. We're not bad or unfeeling people; it's just all so big, so much to bear. So we filter it.

Having that filter or lens crack or break or get refocused is stressful, and it can be frightening. The blind man's parents see what has happened to their son, and they are beginning to see that there is something about this Jesus that is different and important. But they are afraid, because seeing and accepting that fully would have consequences for them. For them to acknowledge what they saw, which was the loving, accepting, sovereign power of God revealed in Jesus, would put them out of their worshipping community. "Don't ask us;" they tell the Pharisees. "How should we know? He's a grown man; ask him what happened. *[Aside]* – Son, you're on your own." So they saw, but they didn't want to, and they did everything they could to protect their eyes and put things back together the way they were before the light shined in their direction.

Fear and opposition run rampant in this story, and I have to ask myself, why are we so afraid? Why is the love Jesus offers us so threatening? The answer I see in this text is that Jesus and all that he is and does are threatening to people invested in the status quo, people who want things to stay the same. Sometimes we want things to stay the way they are because it benefits us; we've got a comfortable place. Sometimes we want to keep things the same because we've just got it all balanced, the chaos and mess, and we don't want to have to deal with having it come loose. But if

there's anything Jesus is going to do, it's shake things loose. And so the struggle commences.

When we fight against Jesus, as we so often do, it's because we don't want to see. We don't want to see others, not really, truly. Because to see people truly, the way God might see them, is to have an encounter, and to have an encounter is a two-way event; it's not just to see, but to be seen. And that, we've decided, is just going to be too painful or too hard. I'm thinking of the way we are when we're on the warpath about something. We don't really listen to other people; we're just waiting for them to stop talking so we can say what we need to say. We get all wound up about things that aren't really the issue, like when I've decided I want my kids to do something a particular way, and the particular way becomes more important to me than whatever it is we're trying to get done. That kind of thing. We just pile up the energy around ourselves, so we don't have to be real. If I don't listen to you, if I don't look at you long enough to really see you, then you won't be able to ask me to change anything.

I think, too, of the wall that surrounds Bethlehem and so many homes and communities in the West Bank. I can think of no greater symbol for not seeing. The stated purpose for the wall is security, and there is good reason for Israel to want security. Yet the effect of the wall is to make sure I cannot see you, nor you see me. This is the effect of checkpoints all along the roadways, set up with cattle chutes for people to pass through and guarded by young soldiers, just doing their duty, who learn pretty quickly not to see villagers as people, because it just makes things harder; they aren't taught Arabic, not the word for ambulance or hospital or have a nice day. I want

you to hear me: Israel is not the only place where these things happen, and it does not mean Israelis are bad people. But the system they've allowed to be put in leads to a human blindness that is having tragic consequences.

Brothers and sisters, for me this is the meaning of sin. It is living out of the assumption that I or my group or community can figure out whatever we need to know in this life, all by ourselves. And to live that way is one of the most exhausting and damaging things I know—to be in Send mode all the time, never checking ourselves against any external word, focusing only on the anxiousness that drives us on every day. It's exhausting. And it's deadening. And it's what Jesus came to save us from.

So we look to the man born blind, and to his transformation in this story. He began as an object—known only from the outside, discussed by others as if he weren't even standing there, as if he were deaf as well as blind. He began this way, but once his eyes were opened, his voice was freed up too. He began to speak for himself and to own what had happened to him at Jesus' hand. And as he became more and more a real person, and as the Pharisees tried to control and spin his story, their self-centered attack on him helped him see the truth. And the truth, which scripture says will set us free, also got him kicked out of the temple and into the dirt. Finally Jesus reappeared, allowing the newly healed eyes of the blind man to see not only the truth, but also the Light of Life itself.

My belief is that God has put church here for this—to be a place where we can help each other see the truth. The church is here to help people be real and honest, to help people experience with joy the radical, healing love of Jesus and to find our voices

to sing and tell about what's happened to us. We are here—we come to worship and give our money and our time and our service—in hopes of learning to see with the eyes of our hearts, and finally to love. It may be that this love puts us in the way of trouble on behalf of the gospel. But the good news today is that Christ seeks an encounter with you and with me. So be not afraid. Lay down your defenses, find your rest in Chris, and look directly into the light.

Looking directly into the light (Richard Lischer, "Acknowledgment," *Christian Century*, March 3, 1999)

...Jesus heals the man, disappears from the narrative and reappears at the end to receive, confirm and vindicate the blind man now healed and a disciple. Most of the action occurs between Jesus' two arrivals. It is difficult to believe it is coincidental that the form of the narrative corresponds to the form of the story of the church: Jesus comes with blessing and instruction, Jesus departs, Jesus will return with vindication for his church. The church is now living in the time of Jesus' departure, the period between his first and his final manifestations.

The time of Jesus' absence is no picnic. In fact, the man born blind could have said understandably to himself more than once, "I never asked to be healed. If this is what it means to be blessed of God, I think I am willing to relinquish some divine favors." Perhaps no biblical story illustrates quite so dramatically the truth of repeated experience: God's favor more often leads into than away from difficulties. A relationship to God does not remove one from but often places one in the line of fire. Those who preach faith as the cessation of pain, suffering, poverty, restless nights and turbulent days are offering false comfort. Notice what happened to the healed man during Jesus' absence. (Fred B. Craddock, "Coping in Jesus' Absence," *The Christian Century*, March 14, 1990, p. 275)

"It has been suggested that the origins of denominations occurred when the healed blind men met each other. At first they were all excited about the miracle of sight that Jesus had given them, but as they talked about how Jesus had healed them, they began to discover some significant differences. For some, the healing came with simply a touch from Jesus (Mt 9:29; 20:34). Another proudly boasted that he had enough faith so that Jesus didn't have to touch him to

perform the miracle (Mk 10:52). Another meekly exclaimed that Jesus not only touched him twice, but also "spit on his eyes" in order for him to see clearly (Mk 8:23). The final one really felt embarrassed to admit that even though a touch wasn't part of his healing, Jesus' "spit" wasn't enough. Jesus had mixed his saliva with dirt and put the mud on his eyes and then told him to go and wash in some pool of water (Jn 9:6-7). Since each one thought his healing was normal and better than the others, they divided into spittites and non-spittites; muddites and non-muddites; touchites and non-touchites. Denominationalism was born." (Brian Stoffregen, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john9x1.htm>)