

Moving Beyond Blindness – John 9 – March 26, 2017

The Rev. Sister Judith Schenck shares this story, "Eddie was the extrovert in the community for the disabled in the assisted living unit. He always plunked himself down right in the middle of where the action was – in a chair by the mailboxes, at the entrance to the dining room, or right in front of the TV in the sitting room.

Eddie knew everyone by name. 'Good morning Miss Liddy. Your knees must be hurting you today.' 'Hello there, Harry. Lydia was looking for you, and, my, but she was mad.' 'Hello, Maxine, you got a letter today. Maybe it's from that son of yours.' 'Watch out, Charlie, someone spilled water there, and the floor might be slick.'

Eddie was blind. He was born that way. But he didn't miss a trick. He saw more with his blindness than most of us see with our two good eyes. He saw with his ears, and his gut, and his heart. Sometimes 'blind' is not really blind and 'seeing' is not really sight."

http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_94997_ENG_HTM.htm

In this story, John uses the images of seeing and blindness figuratively and literally. He devotes an entire chapter to tell the ironic and humorous story of a blind man who has the capacity to recognize Jesus Christ when others cannot see him for who he is, even in the face of a miraculous witness.

The tale begins while Jesus is walking in Jerusalem with his disciples. It is the Sabbath. They come across a blind man, and the disciples stop in their tracks, point to him, and turn him into an object lesson. It doesn't matter that he's sitting right there, able to hear every word. They begin talking about him, and they want Jesus to tell them what is the reason for this man's punishment.

It was their understanding that physical afflictions were a consequence of sin. They saw his blindness as a punishment for someone's wrongdoing. Did the parents sin, and thus their baby was afflicted at birth, or was his own sin so overwhelming that it caused the blindness. Even though we don't generally assume that afflictions are direct punishments for sin, how many of us have put God to the question when we or someone we love is struck by tragedy? A diagnosis of a dread disease causes us to wonder, did I do something to offend God?

Some other tragedy – accident, a loss of job, the sudden death of a loved one – these situations can sometimes lead us to wonder if God is punishing us for some wrongdoing. Someone cries out in anguish, "What did I do to deserve this?" In our moments of despair and anguish, these are natural and understandable questions. That is not the kind of God that Jesus has shown us. Jesus has shown us a God who wants us to be whole – not a God that afflicts us.

But then sometimes we do make assumptions about those who suffer. We may proclaim that a person's lot in life is due to his or her own mistakes or poor choices. A child is born with fetal alcohol syndrome because his mother is an addict. A man can't provide for his family due to his criminal record. People refuse to get off welfare because they want a free ride. We make judgments about the people who are marginalized in society based on our own expectations of how we think they should live their lives, neglecting to see the role of societal dysfunction in those situations.

Jesus responds to the disciples' question saying that this man was born blind, so that God's works might be revealed in him. Here is an opportunity to do God's work. To show compassion. To show mercy. To care for another human being. We are sometimes blinded our own expectations. We see judgment, where God shows us an opportunity for loving our neighbor.

And so Jesus does just that. Loves his neighbor. He does it in a really odd manner. Using his own saliva to make mud from the dust on the ground, he slathers it on the eyes of the blind man and then tells him to go wash in the pool, and then he could see.

This is where the story gets rather funny. Instead of being a scene of rejoicing and celebration, it becomes a time of second guessing and twenty questions. He comes back. Jesus and his disciples have apparently moved on. The man is basking in his newly discovered vision of the world, looking around, taking it all in. His neighbors see him, and the questions begin. "Is that him? No, that can't be him. It's just someone who looks like him." The people could not comprehend what had happened. They knew this man. He had been blind from birth. But couldn't figure out how he could suddenly see. They questioned him, and he kept assuring them "It's me. It's really me."

Even after explaining to them what Jesus had done, with the spitting and the mud and the washing, there was still no rejoicing or congratulating him. They wanted to know where Jesus was. Well, of course the poor man had no idea. He didn't even know what Jesus looked like.

His neighbors dragged him to go see the Pharisees, the religious leaders. The questions continued. But the Pharisees had different concerns. They had already met Jesus a few times and considered him a troublemaker. They were very interested in the fact that Jesus did what he did on the Sabbath. Any form of work on the Sabbath was strictly prohibited. This healing constituted work. Some of them claimed Jesus was a sinner, since he broke the law by working. Others believed that he had to be from God in order to perform this great sign. They were divided, so they asked the man, "What do you think?"

Now, the man had had some time to ponder a few things. His understanding was growing. At first, he was overwhelmed by what had happened to him. But now the realization was dawning

on him that Jesus was more than your typical man on the street. And so in response to their inquiry, he told them, "He is a prophet."

Well of course, that threw them into a tailspin. What did this guy know? They chose a different tack. They wondered if this man had actually been blind at all. Since they didn't want to believe that Jesus had actually performed this sign, they took the stand that this man was a liar. They called on his parents, and put them to the question. The parents were afraid of angering the Pharisees because the Pharisees had been cleaning house. They were tossing people out of the synagogue who claimed that Jesus was the Messiah. The parents didn't want to get involved. They didn't want to stir up any trouble. They feared for their own well-being.

By now they had seen for themselves that their son was no longer blind. They had spent a lifetime as the focus of accusation and judgment due to his being born blind. Hearing over and over again that their sins had caused his affliction. But now things had changed. They had heard his witness, his story about what Jesus had done for him, but they weren't ready to stand up for him. They had heard the good news, but were not ready to take the leap. Fear was holding them back. Fear of negative repercussions. I wonder if they ever found the courage to stand with their son.

I wonder too if sometimes fear keeps us from standing up for the message of the gospel. To confront injustice when we see it, instead of just ignoring it. To make a positive difference when it is well within our power to do so. Or do we fear how people will react to our stance? Do we fear being thrown out of the status quo, for taking a stand for Jesus? Do we worry about being labeled a troublemaker? Do we distance ourselves from those who are marginalized because we don't want to be labeled a sympathizer?

And so the parents said, "Yes he's our son. Yes, he was born blind. But as to how he regained his sight, you had better ask him. We don't want to get involved."

Exit parents, reenter son. The discussion continued. The man born blind had had some more time to think and his responses to them were becoming bolder and bolder. The Pharisees claimed Jesus was a sinner. "Look I don't know if he's a sinner or not. I do know that I was blind but now I see." Clearly they weren't getting the picture. They engaged in a heated exchange about Jesus, and when the man countered with the point that no one but a person from God could have healed him, they cut him off by saying, "What do you know. You're nothing but a sinner and you think you can teach us?" To them Jesus was a sinner, the man was a sinner. They would not and could not accept the truth when it was standing right in front of their faces. They were so sure that they were right and he and Jesus were wrong, that they were blind to the truth. They threw him out.

Later, Jesus had heard what had happened to the man, and so he went looking for him. Of course, the man didn't know who he was, having never actually seen him, but Jesus identified himself. The man born blind worshipped him and believed in him. The one person, the person who was born blind, was the person who could see – who could understand – who Jesus really was. Everyone else got bogged down with questions, and so they missed the truth that was right before their eyes.

The disciples missed the opportunity to help a person in need, because they were caught up in the debate about why that person was in need in the first place. Is he a sinner? Did his parents sin? Is that why he is living a life of affliction and hardship? And Jesus told them, does it matter? You are called to do the works of God. Show him some compassion. Show him some love. Take care of his needs first, and then worry about his soul. The blind man was a perfect example of that. After Jesus showed compassion and healed him, he was drawn into the life faith. After he was made whole, he believed.

The neighbors of the blind man couldn't believe their own eyes. The miraculous healing was a sign to them of who Jesus was. But it because it went against everything that they had ever known and believed, their minds simply couldn't grasp it. They tried to rationalize it away, they tried to deny that it happened, that it really wasn't the man. And when that failed, they dragged him off to the authorities, because it was too much for them to handle.

The man's parents were trapped by their own fear. For them to get involved, they risked being thrown out of the synagogue. It was safer and more comfortable for them to remain within the boundaries of what was "normal" and what was familiar. Their faith was in their own ability to be in control. To give that up meant that they would have to trust in something beyond themselves, and they were unable to take that leap of faith.

And finally the Pharisees. They were within their right to question the man on how he regained his sight. It was a big deal after all, with loads of implications. But because they were bogged down by their own belief systems and they were unwilling to consider that maybe Jesus did have the authority of God, all they wanted to do was discredit him and bring him up on charges for breaking the law. Their god was a god of laws, and breaking one was a big deal. Their rigid legalism kept them from seeing the compassionate and loving act and kept them blind to the true identity of Jesus.

Every character in this story exhibited various types of blindness to the truth about Jesus. Everyone was trapped by their own understandings and was unwilling to open their eyes and actually see what was staring them in the face. Except for the blind man. The one fellow who had every right to miss the witness was the one person to truly see Jesus. And his reason for believing? He said it himself, "The one thing I do know, I was blind but now I see."