

“The Blinding and Illuminating Light”

John 9

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My wife Jeanne teaches drawing. The problem with learning to draw is not correctly placing the lines, but how you see. So, she sometimes uses a technique many others use. She gives a picture to a student, say a hand. Then she tells the student to turn it upside down and draw it. They protest, of course. But many are astonished to find that after doing it, they have drawn the hand as they never thought they could. Why? It's about seeing. When people learning to draw see a hand, they don't see the actual lines and curves of the hand, but the idea of a hand in their mind. That's what they draw, and it's often a childish caricature of a hand rather than the one in front of them. They see what they already know, not what's actually there.

This is a story about knowing and seeing. It's about a blind man who saw a whole new world come to light before his miraculously opened eyes. It's about other men who thought they knew what they saw, but it was only a caricature.

As Jesus and the disciples walk along, they saw someone who must have been a familiar figure, a blind beggar. This prompts the question that is familiar to all of us. Why? Our religious system has to have an answer for this.

And the disciples already had the answer, an answer they had learned from the religious authorities of their day: sin. It was really one of those multiple choice questions. In their minds there were basically two alternatives. Either (a) this man sinned or (b) his parents sinned. There was no other option like (c.) all of the above or (d) none of the above. Every evil could be neatly explained as a direct result of some one's sin. They knew that's the way God runs the universe.

Jesus' responds with an extraordinary statement. "Neither this man sinned, nor his parents. He was born blind so that the work of God might be revealed in him."

As always Jesus refuses to get drawn into a discussion of the cause of some evil or problem. Jesus isn't interested in beginnings, he's interested in ends; not in causes but results. Jesus' interest with evil is not where it came from but what he is going to do about it. Everybody around Jesus is stuck in the past, some past sin, some past problem. Jesus is interested in the future, in the redeeming work of God.

Be careful now. Jesus does not mean that God caused the man to be born blind so that at some future date this miraculous cure would take place and there would be applause all around. God doesn't go around setting up problems to be resolved, diseases to be cured. Jesus point is that we shouldn't spend our time trying to discover what causes evil in the world. Rather, we need to keep your eyes on God and see what he is doing to get rid of evil. And then, as if to prove the point, Jesus heals the man. True, he does it rather strangely. Jesus picks up some dirt, spits on it, plasters it on the man's eye, and tells him to go wash it off at the pool of Siloam. And then, interestingly, Jesus disappears from the scene till the very end of the story.

The man did what he was told, white-caned his way to the pool, washed off the mud, and he saw again!

In John's gospel the story of the miraculous cure takes only two verses. The trouble he got into afterward takes 39 verses. And that, as Paul Harvey would say, is the rest of the story. Perhaps no biblical story illustrates more dramatically the truth of repeated Christian experience: God's entry into our lives more often leads us into trouble than away from it.

This formerly blind man goes home to a heap of trouble. He walks back into the old neighborhood, and you'd think there would be a big party. No, everyone finds this very disturbing. He insists he's the same man as before, but clearly he's not. His stumbling, hesitant walk is gone, along with his familiar tin cup. You see, for them his identity was all tied up in his dependence, his poverty. These marked his place in the community. But now he was clearly different. Erect, assured, independent. But they don't know him anymore. Something has happened that shakes up their world, and they don't know what to do with it. They don't see because it doesn't fit what they know.

"What happened", they ask him. He tells them what he knows in the simplest terms. "This guy Jesus came along and put mud in my eye and told me to go wash and now I see." "Where is he?" "I don't know."

What do you do when something happens outside of normal experience? You go to the experts, the people who know about these things, and can interpret the ways of God. Right?

Wrong! They're pretty good at spotting irregularities but these theologians can't recognize God if he bites them on the nose. They already know what God does and doesn't do.

So, the first interrogation begins. It's here we find out that this healing had taken place on the Sabbath Day. Not good timing, Jesus! It seems Jesus is always busy on the Sabbath. Sometimes, like a minister, you wonder what he was doing the other six days of the week.

The Pharisees have the man tell them the whole story, "He put mud in my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." At first they seem divided. Some of them think this may be a God moment, but they're quickly drowned out by those who smell a rat. All this spitting and making mud packs and running around to pools. Not good Sabbath activity at all.

They were all caught in a theological dilemma. How is it that a lawbreaker gives sight to the blind? How can this be from God? It was always the problem with Jesus, who claims to come from God but does all the wrong things in the wrong ways with the wrong people. Finally they ask the man, "what do you say about him?" "He is a prophet." Faint praise, you might say, but at least there's movement.

The Pharisees are moving in the opposite direction. They feel more and more threatened by the piercing light of Jesus' miracle. They refuse to believe. They bring in the man's parents. Perhaps he was lying, perhaps he wasn't born blind after all. These poor old folks, cowed and threatened by the authorities had to admit that their son was in fact born blind, but pleaded ignorance about how he was healed. "Talk to him, not us. We don't know what happened." They were afraid of being excommunicated from their local synagogue.

So they hauled the man back in for more interrogation. Now they really began to apply religious pressure. "Come on now, give glory to God! We know this man who supposedly healed you was nothing but a sinner."

Did you hear it? "We know!" Like the drawing students they see a hand, but it was a caricature. They couldn't discern the peculiar lines and gentle curves of the hand of God. Typical of the established order, you stick with the way things are. You see what you already know. You refuse to look at any other possibilities. And precisely here this man and the Pharisees begin to go down two very different paths of knowledge. The formerly blind man

says, "I know one thing. I was blind and now I see." He is willing open his mind like his newly opened eyes to the idea that God is doing something here. But the Jewish leaders know too. They know what God is like, how God acts, and Jesus doesn't fit the bill.

In the face of this man's simple testimony the elaborate charade of the Pharisees begins to collapse. And the blind man knows it. When they demand that he retell the story one more time, he can't resist pricking the needle into their hot air balloon, "I've told you over and over and you won't listen. Maybe you want to become his disciple too." (A first century David Letterman!)

That was all they were going to take. They jumped all over him him. They invoked the hallowed name of Moses. "We are Moses' disciples. Who do you think you are?" But the man was not finished. The more they blustered on in their spiritual blindness, the more he saw the light. The more they derided Jesus, the more he recognized Jesus. "Here is an astonishing thing. You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes.... If this man doesn't come from God, I don't know who does". That's the last straw. Hilariously, they now admit what they denied from the start, that the man who was born blind was now healed. "You were a sinner from birth, that's why you were blind". And they threw him out

"One thing I know." He didn't know all about Jesus, but he knew one thing. Someone wonderful had happened. This simple witness echoes across the centuries in the stories of countless others I've heard. "One thing I know", is that when I was going through my divorce I hurt so much I couldn't eat or sleep, and so filled with hate and fear I couldn't think, but somehow I got through it. There were nights I felt a strange calm, and days I experienced a strange ray of hope. And I've come to recognize that the "somehow" was Jesus. Another person might say: "One thing I know," that when that doctor told me it was cancer that icy grip of dread grabbed me, but over the weeks it gradually loosened into a sort of peace that kept me going through the surgery and the chemo. And it know it was Jesus.

You see, faith does not always operate in the glow of certainty. You don't always start knowing everything, but there's a simple truth that rings true in the depths of your heart. "One thing I know." He touched me. He was with me. All some of us know sometimes is this inner

conviction of Jesus' presence. What you have to do is cling to that one thing you know until, like with this man, one day Jesus shows up.

But the Pharisees knew a thing or two also. Theirs is another kind of knowledge, not the knowledge of faith, but the knowledge of arrogance. Alan Jones says that the opposite of faith isn't always doubt. Sometimes it's a false certainty. A person who claims to know for certain the mind and will of God can be truly pathological.

You can see it in the blind secularism that surrounds us in our culture. It "knows" that the universe is a closed box where nothing and no one intervenes, where there are no surprises, and where everything can be explained and accounted for.

But this story warns us that there is also a religious blindness, an arrogant religious knowledge, which is even more dangerous. The Jewish leaders "knew". They claimed to "see". What they knew and believed to be God was not God, but a religious system that was as closed and tight as the modern secular picture of the universe. They "knew" that God doesn't come up to a blind man on the Sabbath and say, "Here's mud in your eye", and heal him. How can God break his own rules? They "knew" that sin caused blindness and that God hated sinners. They "knew" that Moses was God's only spokesman and that their brand of law-abiding religion was the only way to God. They knew they were right. And because they knew and because they claimed to see they sank into the most terrible blindness of all. This is not the blindness of those who can't see, but who won't see.

Now, here we are reading this in church, which means it's a story about us. But the story challenges us to ask where we fit in the story today. We all like to identify with the blind man, but Barbara Brown Taylor suggests a simple question. "Who are the religious people who follow the traditions of the elders, and who---on the basis of that tradition---believe they can tell the true prophets from the false ones? Who are the guardians of the faith, the fully initiated, law-abiding, pledge-paying, creed-saying, theologically correct people who can spot a heretic a mile away?"

According to John, these are the people who better watch out because they think they know and can see. How often hasn't our fearful clinging to what we know blinded us to what

God wants us to know? How often haven't our codified and systematized versions of God kept us from recognizing the hand of God. How often haven't we refused to follow Jesus into new paths or ministries because it was unfamiliar territory. How often hasn't our penchant for pinning the label of sin on people, kept the light of God's grace from shining in sinner's lives.

Meanwhile, the man born blind, was sure about one thing, once he was blind and now he could see, and that it was Jesus who did it. The blind man was on the road of faith, a faith that is open to what God can do in ways that defy our logical categories, our proof-texted doctrines. Faith senses the finger of God in the big and little miracles of our lives.

Did you notice how Jesus pretty much disappeared through most of the story? Like many of us, the blind man was left to struggle with the implications of his encounter with Jesus on his own. He had to stand up to mounting criticism, and the stronger the opposition, the bolder his faith became.

And at the end he stands alone, literally an outcast, thrown out of the institution that was the center of his community. But Jesus finds him. The man's faith is not complete until he not only acknowledges what has happened to him, but knows who did it. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" "Tell me who he is and I will believe." "Here I am," says Jesus. "Lord, I believe" the man says, as he falls at Jesus' feet.

Knowing that Jesus has touched your life is not enough. Faith ultimately leads to worship. The Jewish leaders had told him to "give glory to God" by denying Jesus. But now, at Jesus invitation, he truly "gives glory to God" by bowing before the one whom God sent to be the light of the world. Now the blind man truly sees. That's what worship is all about, it's the ultimate insight, the wonderful, glorious experience of seeing God's truth and love in Jesus. In worship the darkness of our boxed-in world vanishes before the blazing light of the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Remember the story opens with the disciple's question about sin. "Did this man sin or his parents?" In the middle of the story the Jewish leaders are intent on pinning the label of sinner on the blind man and on Jesus. And now, at the end, the issue of sin returns. Jesus says to

the Jewish leaders, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." (9:41)

What is sin here? It's not the presence of illness or violations of God's law. It's not the crummy, selfish sins we commit every day. Here Jesus defines sin in a whole new and radical way. It's not the wrong things we do, but what we do with Jesus. The only way to be excluded from God's love in Jesus is to turn your back on it. The only sin for which there is no remedy, the terrible blindness which condemns us to perpetual darkness, is refusing to see the light of God grace in the face of Jesus.

Every last one of us here is a sinner. But no sins we have ever done can cut us off from God. They are all forgiven by the Father who so loved the world that he gave his only Son that we might not perish but have eternal life. All we have to do is open our sin-blinded eyes to the blazing light of his grace.

Philip Bliss says it all in his old gospel hymn,

"The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin—the light of the world is Jesus: Like sunshine at noonday his glory shone in—the light of the world is Jesus. Come to the light, it's shining for thee, sweetly the light has dawned upon me. Once I was blind, but now I can see—the light of the world is Jesus.