

I WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE!

(09/25/2022)

Scripture Lesson: John 9:1-41
Mark 8:22-26

“As he [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” (John 9:1-2)

This morning, we listened to a reading from the Gospel of Mark and one from the Gospel of John. The two passages have points of similarity; for example, both men have their sight restored through the application of saliva on their eyes. They may be two slightly different accounts of the same healing.

To be expected, the account in John contains much more detail, much more dialogue. It also raises a question regarding the blind man’s condition that Mark doesn’t mention, a question or a concern that we might share with the disciples.

As described by John, the man has been blind from birth. His congenital affliction raises several theological questions. Why do things like this happen to people? Why are some people born blind? Why do some infants and children die from cancer? As you know, our family struggled with these questions for over a month when our one-month-old granddaughter, Emerson, was suspected to have a cancerous growth in her neck. Fortunately, after extensive tests, her team from Children’s Hospital and Dana-Farber assured Kristen, Mike, and the rest of us that Emerson was ok, that the lump was already shrinking. Even though we felt like we dodged the bullet, we realized on a deep and personal level that people struggle with these questions, and they are difficult questions to answer. Perhaps when our Tuesday afternoon study group resumes, we will consider reading Scott Samuelson’s book, *Seven Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering*.

A second but related set of questions may also come to mind. When confronted with tragedy, we might find ourselves asking not “Why is this happening?” but “Why is this happening *to me*?” Note that the disciples don’t ask “Why did this happen?” They ask, “Why did this happen to *this person*?” In the context of their theology, their understanding of God, they want to know if the man were being punished for something that he did or if he were being punished for something his parents did. Since he was blind from birth, the possibility that *he* had committed a punishable sin seems unlikely, unless, of course, you believe in reincarnation.

Several years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner struggled with these questions in his book, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* William Paul Young also addressed these questions in

his novel, *The Shack*, which we read several years ago in our spiritual study and growth group. They are questions that arise within each of us at various points in our lives.

Our various theologies, which are attempts to understand and articulate our relationship with God, can help us in our struggle with these questions. However, as both Kushner and Young noted, the standard formulas don't always bring either illumination or comfort. There are also times when the standard answers may blind us to the healing and growth that can take place within the context of the tragedy.

We need to be humble when it comes to our theological formulations. Instead of proclaiming that we have the one true understanding of God and the meaning of life, we should regard our personal or denominational theology as a tentative and evolving formulation. This would leave room for us to grow, for our religious beliefs and hence our faith to evolve. This is what happened to Jesus' disciples as they traveled with him. However, it didn't happen to every person who heard or experienced Jesus.

We would have to be deluded to believe that we human beings with our few senses, our little brains, and our limited language could possibly understand, let alone accurately describe the mystery of creation, the meaning of life, and the presence of suffering and tragedy in our life and in the world. Yet we seek to do this in relation to the One whom we call God. The evolution of our understanding of God, as illustrated in *The Shack*, often arises from reflections on our own life experience as we try to make sense of something that has happened to us.

When something tragic happens to us, to someone we love, or to people whom we know to be suffering, whether we are religious or not, we are led to reflect on the nature and meaning of life. We wonder why bad things happen to good people and why they happen to us. We wonder why, if God is all-good and all-powerful, there is so much suffering in the world.

It is not an uncommon experience, when we are struggling with these questions, to discover that we need to let go of our childish understanding of God with its concomitant expectations to discover or rediscover the living God. Jesus reminded his disciples of this time and time again, specifically around the issue of his own immanent suffering, his crucifixion and death. This helps to explain why, on an experiential level, every theological formulation can only be conditional.

Imagine if we, with our present-day scientific understanding, were transported back to ancient Greece. If we were to ask the great philosophers and scientists of the day to explain the primary substance, the basic building block of not only the universe but also of us, Thales would tell us that it was water. Anaximenes would assure us that it was air. Anaximander would

describe it as a combination of hot and cold. Empedocles would maintain that everything was composed of four elemental principles: earth, air, fire, and water. I suspect that with our present understanding of the atomic structure of matter and the 106 elements that comprise it, we would find their formulations quaint.

Like the Pharisees in our scripture reading, we attach too much importance to our religious words and concepts. Wars have been fought and inquisitions carried out over the matter of whose formulation of the great mystery of the universe is the one and only correct one. Yet we need words. We need words to think. We need words to communicate.

The Bible is a collection of words. At its best, the Bible points to reality or at least one version of reality. It is not the Way, but it can help us find the Way. This is how Jesus used words: he used them to point toward the experience of the kingdom of God. He could not give us this experience, but he could point the way and help us experience what he experienced. This explains why he used parables in his teaching. Words cannot do justice to the truth to which he witnessed.

The historian of religion Heinrich Zimmer once said that the truths that are least important can be articulated most clearly and taught most easily. The truths that are somewhat important can be articulated or taught, but only in a limited, distorted form. The deepest and most important truths cannot be articulated at all. When we come to them, we are reduced to silence. They can only be experienced.

The ancient Chinese mystic, Chuang Tzu, once said,

*The purpose of a fish trap is to catch fish;
when the fish are caught, the trap is forgotten.
The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits;
when the rabbits are caught, the snare is forgotten.
The purpose of words is to convey ideas;
when the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten.
Where is the person who has forgotten words?
That is the person with whom I would like to talk.*

The educator Jerome Bruner once said, "Concepts in psychology are nonsense. But the best ones are liberating nonsense. And God greets those in heaven who propose liberating nonsense." I suspect this is equally true of theology. To paraphrase Bruner, "Concepts in theology are nonsense. But the best ones are liberating nonsense. And God greets those in heaven who propose liberating nonsense!" This is what I hope I am doing in my sermons.

The man described in our scripture passage has been blind from birth. Note that he does not ask Jesus to heal him. He may have given up on the possibility of seeing. He does not even see Jesus (obviously), but Jesus sees him. Jesus' disciples want to engage their master in a theological discussion about why this man was born blind. Jesus is not interested in discussing why bad things happen to good people. He restores the man's sight to show the power of God to bring light from the darkness.

The man's neighbors had so stereotyped their friend as a blind man that they question whether this sighted man is the same man whom they knew. They obviously know what he looks like, but they cannot conceive of him in his new condition. This is because they do not relate to the man but to the category "blind person." They also have such a limited view of the great mystery of life that there is no room in their understanding of life for miraculous healing.

When the man's friends ask him how his eyes were opened, the man says that Jesus made mud and put it on his eyes. When he washed it off, he could see. To this point, the man has not seen Jesus.

The Pharisees who investigate the healing regard Jesus as a sinner for healing the man on the Sabbath. They, too, are constrained by their conceptual framework. They have such a limited grasp of the mystery of life that there is no room in their theology for miraculous healing. Rather than admit that this can happen, they question whether the man was really born blind.

The Pharisees try to get the man to condemn Jesus. The man refuses to engage in a theological argument about what is or is not a sin. He stands on his experience. He says that all he knows is that he was blind, but now he sees. From this, he draws the conclusion that Jesus must be from God. The Pharisees, reluctant to give credit to Jesus, become enraged and drive the man from their presence. It seems that no one can just be happy for the man and give thanks to God for the healing that he has experienced!

Jesus then searches for the man and finds him. Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man. The man has no idea what Jesus is talking about. He asks Jesus to help him find the Son of Man that he might worship him. Jesus tells him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking to you is he." The blind man now not only sees; he *really* sees! He sees deeper! He sees what his neighbors and the Pharisees have missed!

What is important is not the words, but the experience. I was blind but now I see. Christianity is not about a theology; it is about a relationship! This explains why in our prayer on communion Sunday we enter a conversation with Jesus. We recall that Jesus is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. If we open our eyes, we will see him. If we open our ears, we will hear his

word. If we open our hearts, we will “see with the eyes of our heart enlightened.” Then we will become more loving!

Of those of us who were baptized, some were baptized as infants or children; some may have received the sacrament of adult or believer baptism. The Sacrament of Baptism proclaims that Jesus is with us, that Jesus has been with us since our birth. However, when we were infants or children, we didn’t know very much about Jesus. As we become older, through the teaching of our parents, our Sunday school or CCD teachers, and through reading the Bible, our eyes have gradually opened. Like the man who was born blind, we begin to discover Jesus; he moves from being an historical figure to a living reality in our lives.

How do we know whether our religious beliefs and our tentative formulations are true? We know because of the fruit they bear in our lives! When we find that which we seek, it will touch us deeply. It will change our life. It will put us in touch with a healing, liberating power. When Jesus removes the scales that cover our eyes, when he helps us see God, life, other people, and ourselves through his eyes, our lives will be changed. Then we, like the man in the scripture lesson, we will be healed!

Like the man born blind, we need to remember that, whether we know it or not, Jesus is searching for us. We need to be open to the presence of our Lord as he reaches out to us. We need be open to the healing power that he brings to bear on our spiritual blindness and the crosses we carry in our daily lives. When we are healed, when we discover a deeper realm of meaning behind what we experience as tragedy, like the man born blind, we may discover the One who has been walking beside us all this time.

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September 25, 2022*