

A MAN BORN BLIND

John 9:1-41
The fourth Sunday in Lent
March 30, 2014
All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

In Christian tradition this Fourth Sunday in Lent was a time of encouragement to those pursuing the Lenten fast achieved by some measure of relaxation of the rules. It has been called, among other names, *laetare* or 'joyful' Sunday from the Latin mass which began "O be joyful". In some places the fast would be relaxed even to the point of allowing the celebrations of weddings on *laetare* Sunday. Nowadays we recognize every Sunday as a Feast of the Resurrection and so an encouragement to persevere whether or not we choose to relax our discipline. So to those of you observing the fast, keep going for the blessings of the fast will soon cease being found in your own sense of accomplishment and rather be found in some kind of new perspective on life. For those of you who have relaxed completely, today is an invitation to begin anew in observing the fast. And to those of you who have not yet joined in at all, this day serves as a reminder that it is never too late to choose a season of particular focus on what really matters in and for life.

Keeping the fast when it seems that no one else around us is doing so can leave us feeling as though we are somehow out of step with our world, even a little odd. Let's face it: fasting makes little or no sense on most levels. It is as bizarre as thinking that it is in giving things away that we receive; and in serving others that we are most free. Fasting is as silly as saying that it is in dying to ourselves that we find ourselves most fully alive. When we fast we are reminding ourselves that we are not solely material beings; that we benefit from a certain distance from those around us and a change of perspective every now and again. In that distance and perspective we find newness of life.

There are plenty of books in the self-help sections of websites and bookstores that seek to get at ancient spiritual truth and practice from modern and secular perspective. William Powers has written a fascinating one called *Hamlet's Blackberry*¹. This former writer for the *Washington Post* offers a meditation on our constant and even overwhelming connectedness in the age of the smart phone and social media. He wonders how we might achieve a measure of necessary distance in the midst of all the wonders and benefits that connectivity brings us. I like that he is not oversimplifying the issue, suggesting ideas like a digital fast and placing us over and against the benefits of

¹ William Powers, *Hamlet's Blackberry* (Harper-Collins, 2010)

modern technology which he both recognizes and affirms. Instead, he looks at how Plato, Seneca, Franklin, Thoreau and others dealt with technology in their own time and seeks lessons about distance from the fundamentalist philosophy of digital minimalism that seems to afflict so many of us. His underlying point is that we are imbibing something good and wonderful in ways that not only stimulate important and imaginative possibilities but also dull our senses to all kinds of other important aspects of our lives. He sees the benefits of our being one of the connected and massive crowd, but looks for a certain distance from time to time for our own human benefit.

The story of the man born blind is just such a parable. While we tend to see ourselves in the blind man, (*I once was blind, but now I see*), we do well to recognize ourselves in the crowd, --the others: the wider community, the religious people and even the man's own family.

A man born blind is given his sight, hearing the word before he can see it, --hearing the word before it is fully realized in his life. And the community that has known him all his life fails to recognize him. "Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?" What is that about? We all get recognized by markers and context to some degree, rather than seen fully and completely for who we are. Remember that in Jesus'

resurrection it was only his friends who recognized him, and even then, only in characteristic acts like his calling them by name, breaking bread or walking on water. The blind man's community only saw him as a beggar, a disabled and marginal person, someone they had categorized and then missed seeing. We all have this capacity for a kind of visual shorthand in recognizing others and we use it regularly until something or other causes us to have another look. I've seen some of you who only ever see me in a clerical collar and at church take another look when you run into me looking less than formal in the grocery store.

The crowd, --the neighbors—seek to understand their changed world by looking to their authorities, in this case those are the religious people. Rather than celebrating the formerly blind man's good fortune, they question whether he is really telling the truth. Isn't that what most of us would do, confronted with an outlandish story? They look for problems in the story. "How can a man who is a sinner, who does not observe the Sabbath, perform such signs?" Bizarre claims. So troubling. "They were divided", as much as we are when some people start rocking the boat and claiming their full humanity: women, African Americans, GLBT folk and immigrants to name some recent examples. Embrace or exclude? What is the thing to do here as our basic beliefs about how the world is and how the world is supposed to be, proclaimed as the true and pure

faith, --what is the thing to do as our world is threatened and as people might be led astray? How do we sustain the church if God is at work outside it? It is not that we choose to be blinded, but rather that we look away, pressed by our own concerns rather than by the testimony of the other. Can you see yourself yet? I know I can.

And so the religious people resort to their interpretation of basic values. It is all about the family after all, that most basic building block of all that is right and good about our world, especially when we define it as an man and a woman and two point four children forgetting about things like single parents and domestic violence and all manner of other realities. The religious people, still looking to make this new thing go away and win support over and against the growing power of the Jesus movement, call out for "family values" They go to check out the story with the man's parents who confirm that he was indeed born blind.

Then even his parents won't stand by him. They don't want to give up their friends, their community, their traditional ways, their church. They don't want to be outsiders, distanced from the crowd. The gospel is here reflecting the historical reality that followers of the way were eventually expelled from many synagogues even though what became known much later as the Christian movement began as one form of

Judaism among many. Even the man's parents were not willing to go the whole way with their son, and made clear that he could speak for himself.

Our man born blind was abandoned by everyone except the one who gave him sight. In the end *he* heard and saw and worshiped the Son of Man, the One, *the* human, from whom he received respect and hope and newness of life along with his sight. As for the rest of us: "*surely we are not blind are we?*"

Well, we probably are blind in some sense if we cannot imagine a new perspective, a new vision, through gaining some measure of distance from the crowd from time to time.. We are easily blinded by our habits, our customs, our unexamined assumptions, perhaps by certain kinds of addictive behavior. (I used to be fairly anxious if I left home without my wrist watch. Now I'll turn around if I forget my telephone.) The answer is not that we must remain dead in our sins, but that instead we seek some distance from our norms and assumptions from time to time and pay attention to things in our world that are different or challenging to us. The ancient discipline of fasting is really good for achieving this distance. It is through attending to difference that we will often find our eyes being opened even when we decide that what is different is not for us. The good news is that it is never too late to start. We are never too old to learn.

There is always something new to see, --really to see. And that in the seeing, as our eyes are opened, so we discover that we too are seen, noticed, cherished, and granted newness of life. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...