

### **3-26-17 "Now You See Him Now You Don't" A Reflection on John 9: 1-41 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK**

As you may know, John is not your regular Gospel. It's located outside the norm, the norm being what we Church folk call the Synoptic Gospels. You know, those "other guys," Matthew, Mark and Luke—the synoptic trio (synoptic of course means similar). John's different. John's peculiar. John's exceptional. John's atypical... John is the odd man out. And, of course we're forever tremendously grateful for that fact, for John's creativity, originality and exceptionalism. I mean, otherwise, the Gospels risk needless repetition, and with it, perhaps boredom. God forbid.

John is steeped like tea in metaphorical waters. Like peppermint, one either loves or hates that fact—I of course love it even though I'm not fond of peppermint. I love the deep, expanse of rich symbolism. Metaphor opens God to me—where my literal mind naturally closes in on the irrelevant and the inconsequential, metaphor does the opposite—God then expands exponentially beyond imagination. I for one would rather my God be large and mind-blowing than small and predictable. And I sure as heck hope that is true of you too. I know it is popular in some circles to think of God much as a genie in a bottle with a cork in it. But with you I trust, I love the world which John invites us to explore.

John uses ordinary things of ordinary life and transforms them into symbols which help people meet God. There are no romantic episodes in John, no shepherds and wise men, no angels, nor any mystical mountaintop experiences, like the Transfiguration in John. Instead John uses everyday stuff to help us see God, which makes them powerful. Stuff like water, stuff like light and dark, stuff like sight and blindness; which in John's metaphorical world represents believing and not believing. In John as in life, one either sees God or one doesn't, but in John seeing has nothing to do with eyeballs, or maculae, or optic nerves because sight is a metaphor for spiritual vision which sees well beyond our brick and mortal work-a-day world.

In John even an individual like this morning's blind man, blind from birth, is infinitely more than he appears; as actually he is not a "he" at all, nor is he an individual. The word translated in English as "man" is in the original language gender neutral. So assigning a sexual identity is to miss the point. Think, human being, think the universal human creature in all its rich diversity. So therefore, the "man's" blindness from birth, as you can now guess, is actually telling a much larger story. A story of how each and every one of us is blind from birth to countless wonders and miracles and graces, until our eyes are opened to the miracle of them, until life treats us to them, until something unexpected is encountered. Blind we are until someone like Jesus comes into our life and expands our vision sufficiently to sense but

something of the Divine, the Holy Other, the Higher Power; yes, precisely what we good church folk so casually and often carelessly call "God." And yes too, just as we sing, just as we pray God, "Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth thou hast for me." Perhaps that is what John means when he tell us that *"he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed to him."* Could it actually be that God is made known to us in our singing and in our praying? Could it be that in our singing and our praying we come to see more than we otherwise ever could?

In our Gospel today, the human one's song and prayer for spiritual insight, depth, understanding, open eyes--vision!--came true. The longing to see God was fulfilled. Our Jesus showed up unexpectedly and opened his eyes! Although of course it wasn't quite that simple or instantaneous; as we know, as we who travel the path Jesus illuminates have firsthand experience with, the open-eyes-thing is rarely if ever either simple or instantaneous. True spiritual insight is more complicated than that. But our story points the way.

Anyway, our Jesus shows up unannounced and after sharing a startling confession of God's Presence and God's Providence, *"As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."* Jesus gets down to the matter at hand—spiritual sight, which in this case included no small amount of spittle and mud-play—a facial BTW any one of us would be blessed to receive. And then a command, with Jesus as we know there is always a command; and this is the more complicated part, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent)." Yes, we human ones have received Word from our Jesus, we have been touched, we have been directed, we have been sent out according to Jesus' Word along paths of faithful service. Jesus tells all of us what to do with our life. All are sent. Some go. Some do not. Some receive sight. Some do not. But for all us human ones, there will be no sight if there is no effort to travel the right path.

This is old news of course to us church folk but still rather controversial to millions the world round, but without obedience to Jesus' Word, without actually going and doing as we're instructed, spiritual sight will remain something we can only dream of. However once blessed with spiritual sight—an all-encompassing perspective, a humble stance, a wisdom that transcends one's first hand experiences, a sense of universal fellowship and identity—our eyes are truly opened for goodness sake. And yes, until that day, we are each of us a blind beggar from birth as spiritual sight is something we are not born with. Quoting the poet T.S. Eliot, it's here, "one arrives at the beginning and knows it for the first time." Any yet, much of that knowing is knowing how much one doesn't know. It takes a wise man with open eyes to know what one doesn't know. And just so, when the human one in our lesson is pressed for more information about Jesus he responds, "I don't know." At that very moment his eyes were blessedly wide open and he was "seeing" far more than he ever had before and in that

visionary moment he realized his limitation, the horizons beyond which he will never see. And during his inquisition before the Pharisees he reiterates the same, "*one thing I know for sure: '...though I was blind, now I see.'*" A line so profound that it inspired an amazing hymn about grace.

As the story unfolds we're not surprised by the details. The neighbors are confused, the Pharisees are really confused, the parents of the once who was blind but now he sees are called in to testify, "*yep, by golly, that's really my son.*" We're not surprised by this as where blindness is concerned, blindness tends to rule supreme. Blindness is stubborn. Blindness is obstinate. Blindness is convinced of its own way. Blindness is rude and arrogant. Blindness doesn't behold light. Blindness prefers things the way they are. Blindness doesn't even know there is a radial alternative to blindness. Indeed, blindness begets blindness, as the Pharisees self-righteously testify, "*We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man... we do not know where he comes from.*"

It's a fact that blindness leads to schisms, division, disagreements. When staring at the miracle before them and the Jesus in their midst, the Pharisees come off resembling characters from the Jim Carrey movie *Dumb and Dumber*. "*This man [Jesus] is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.' But other [Pharisees] said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?'"* In today's world one need look no further than today's congressional GOP caucus to be reminded of the timeless lesson before us. John writes to us through the ages because blindness is a universal ailment. But all is not lost, the world has One like Jesus to open its eyes... that is, for those who "have eyes to see."

Do you have eyes to see or are you still a beggar, still waiting, still praying? This is the question John wishes us to consider, and there is wisdom in knowing the answer. Twice in this long story Jesus seeks out the human one, at the very beginning to heal, and at the very end to support and guide. Take comfort in that. Whether we see or whether we don't; whether we believe or whether we don't, John wants us to know that the Jesus he knows, the Jesus to which his eyes were opened is ever and always all about seeking us out to bestow upon us the profoundest—truly life-altering—visions that both heal us and send us out forevermore on the path toward even greater health, wholeness, vitality. Yes, us, all of us, again, us human ones of whatever sexual or cultural identity.

Friends, it is not a question of if we have gone looking for God, or Jesus, or you name it, Buddha, YAWAH, Allah, it's a question of whether we are found. Are you found? What if you are not? What if God has come looking for you a million and one times, make that a million and one times every day; and what if each time you were blind to that fact? Yes, just like the Pharisees in the story—experts in religion, blind as a stone. One thing I know with

certainty, blindness before God happens a million and one times a day, which produces tragic consequences the world round. Just take a second or two to imagine that on the off chance your blindness since birth is still totally in force; imagine the currents of unmerited goodness that you're missing; imagine the forgiveness beyond all reason that you're not seeing; imagine the mercy and charity and grace blowing over the lands and seas with stunning consistency that you're not caught up in; imagine the wholeness, the health, the humility and the sense of inclusivity that your blindness is stealing from you. Imagine being blind to God, blind to all Jesus' comings and goings.

Can you? I can. And for those who cannot see what contribution for the better they could make, the ways they could leave the world a better place—for those who are blind to all of this, and there are many millions all around us, I simply couldn't be sadder. By God, they should be in church, praying and singing until their eyes are at last opened!

John indeed gave us something to think about. Many things to pray about. Praise be to God and Amen.