

Sermon on John 9:1-41 – Lent 4, 2011

I'm squeamish! If a show comes on television that features surgical procedures I'll quickly change the channel; but occasionally I've had the misfortune to glance through a medical textbook (with apologies and gratitude to those of you who read them voraciously).

When I do it's with a kind of macabre curiosity as I voyeuristically sample the pictures showing different people's maladies and deformities.

I always wonder what those people feel like having their photo taken with, say, a baseball-sized goitre on the neck or some horrible example of skin cancer. I know they're doing it for science and for my health (and I'm grateful) but isn't their suffering magnified by having doctors and med students gawk at them and discuss them as if they were mere objects? Don't they feel like cadavers before they're even dead?

Today's complex gospel drama begins with a theological version of such a scene. Jesus and his cohorts are walking along and Jesus sees a man, a man who is obviously blind. The disciples see the man as well but they have some more information. They know he's been blind since birth. They use that information to look at him in a different way, they objectify him; he's a theological curiosity, a particularly bad case of a disease called "sin." What's more, in tune with the prevailing theology of the day, they know this with a kind of certainty that is startling. They *know* that sin has caused his malady; the only question is whose sin, his own or his parents.

Notice what the disciples' theology does; it distances the man help and hope; about all he's good for is as a foil in an abstract theological discussion and diagnosis: "Either you blew it or someone close to you did, either way it sucks to be you!"

But Jesus sees the man too and that "seeing" makes all the difference; for when he sees, he doesn't distance himself through abstract categorizing but moves toward the blind man, impelled by God's love and God's purpose! An unbidden drawing near, the magnificence of Grace! This is the Good news of God as it has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ!

All of us here today find ourselves categorized, whether by age, gender, ethnicity, social status, economic class, relational status or, given our gene pool either potential sufferers of a particular disease (always quoted in that most personal of categories, the percentile e.g. you have a 50% percent of contracting such and such disease) or categories of actual sufferers (heart disease victim; cancer victim or survivor).

But the good news of God in Christ is that God doesn't categorize us, doesn't study us from a distance; God moves towards us! In the language of the Book of Common Prayer "all sorts and conditions of men" whatever they happen to be for this man or for us are not curses for sins committed by us, towards us or in paternal proximity to us. This, even if it *is* the case

that we're suffering because of our sin or someone else's! The point is that God doesn't look at us through those sorts of abstract categories. No, our very particular conditions are the staging ground for God's work and God's purpose of love unfolding in our lives.

The story then unfolds as Jesus' seeking, "moving towards love" comes into conflict with an objectifying static understanding of religion. Jesus' actions and words a beautiful but very challenging contrast to the words and actions of mainstream religion, be it ancient or modern.

In response to the disciples' abstractions Jesus performs the astounding but very concrete act of re-creation. With great genius, the writer weaves together Jesus' words and actions in a way that evokes original creation: he juxtaposes the most transcendent self-description: I am the light of the world with the most menial of actions: when he had said this (excuse the vernacular) he horked on the ground and made slimy mud and put it on the man's eyes. Does this bring back memories of Genesis 1 and 2? And he said, "let there be light" following by "and he formed *adam* from *adama*, a muddling from the mud.

After generously inviting the blind man into the dignity of participation in this great sign by having him wash in the pool of Siloam, Jesus vanishes, exits stage right. Like the original creation scene in Genesis God steps back and waits to see what will happen.

The purpose of Jesus' stepping back seems clear; its time to see—there's that word again—where things stand, if people get what believing in him means and there's nothing like a major healing on the Sabbath to make the mud come off and fly!

An equally important reason is that Jesus' absence mirrors the reader's experience; though everything that unfolds has Jesus' identity at the centre of concern, Jesus isn't physically present for most of it. This is meant to draw you and I into the scene; this is our experience of Jesus, present yet absent.

At first it appears that everyone, including the man healed, are in the same boat: There's a lot of questions and not very many answers. But as the drama unfolds and becomes a major dispute and conflict a clear distinction begins to emerge and it's this distinction that gives us our strongest clues as to the identity of Jesus and what it means to believe in him.

The disciples, strangely, fall silent. The first voices we hear after the healing are those that live around the blind man, neighbours; they are discombobulated to say the least; in a very credible rendering the author of the gospel helps see the sheer difficulty of those experiencing a rip in the space-time continuum. The man himself seems equally shocked and discomfited. Unlike other recipients of healing in the gospels he's not asked for anything and once it happens he doesn't ask to follow Jesus. All he has is a name and no location!

The next scene features the man being questioned by the Pharisees. At first they question him in a way that suggests they're genuinely searching for truth; they divide into two

groups, some, who on the basis of their theology, can't imagine Jesus being from God because he has "broken" one of the Ten Commandments by healing on the Sabbath; the other group is more open, willing to at least think about the incongruence of such great power flowing through a so-called sinner.

The man himself is changing; notice the growth, from merely knowing a name, Jesus, to listening in on the God-talk and putting that together with what's happened to him and naming Jesus "a prophet." We're left hanging, though, as to what will happen between the man and the Pharisees for now we're introduced to the man's parents and their interaction with a group called "the Jews."

Modern interpretation has often accused the writer of an anti-Semitic slur, but as other's have pointed out all the characters in the story are Jews! Rather, it's another way the author draws the reader into the story by making it contemporary, if you will, to present conflicts with synagogue leaders. The Pharisees had largely faded from the scene by the time the gospel was written, "The Jews" then, stands in for Jewish religious leadership in general. Indeed making it relevant for our time we might want to replace "the Jews" with "The Christian leaders" or "Church leaders," gulp, the preacher says!

But the rest of us aren't off the hook because then it turns out that the parents of the man are the group in this story most like us! Notice how, in contrast to the growing boldness and faith of their son, they are only really concerned for themselves! They're afraid of losing social and religious status; they too, it turns out, have objectified their son; he's not a person to defend, or to move towards with questions; what's happened to him becomes a bother: "just leave us alone in our religious status quo!"

The scene shifts once again and the man is dragged before the Pharisees once again; and this time the character of each is fully revealed; the man has grown in his understanding to such a degree that he's willing to say that Jesus is unlike any man who's ever lived and the Pharisees, now pictured as reunited in their opposition are willing to revile the man with verbal and physical violence; abusing him with insults and tossing him out of the synagogue with great social and financial costs.

Both the man and the Pharisees have had an opportunity to respond to the grace offered by Jesus' healing; notice the man's path, from a hesitant impersonal naming, "the man called Jesus" and ignorance of his whereabouts to recognizing him as a prophet to a man unlike any other since the beginning of the world; and then further confronting the religious leaders in their hypocrisy and unwillingness to believe what should be clear to them.

There's a wonderful authentic naiveté modeled for us here. A living and growing faith doesn't have all the answers up front but is willing to enrol in the school of grace. The religious leaders on the other hand, whether called Pharisees or "the Jews" move from some openness

to a “hardening of the categories;” unlike the “phantom” case they and the disciples imagine the formerly blind man was/is suffering from, *this* disease really *is* serious! Notice the brutally judgemental language in their last exchange with the man, “We know this man is a sinner...we are disciples of Moses...you are born entirely in your sins and are you trying to teach us?” It’s the language of the disciples in their original appraisal of the blind man, but now unequivocally hardened by the certainties of self-righteousness.

For the second time Jesus seeks out the man unbidden; he’s pulled back to allow hearts to be revealed, to invite people’s minds to apprehend and grow in grace, or...not; to respond with the “sight” of honest questions or to stubbornly claim to “see” through blinded minds.

But now, for the first time he speaks to the man and reveals the goal of grace; he asks the question, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Notice the continuity of the man’s naïveté, he doesn’t jump up and down with “the answer:” “It’s you, it’s you, it’s you!” No, he only cops to what *really* knows and though we might expect him to make the logical leap, he asks a counter-question to which Jesus says, beautifully and appropriately, “You have seen him!” And he’s speaking to you.” “Lord, I believe,” says the man who truly does see, unlike all the other groups in the story, and because he sees, he worships!

Jesus gives the Pharisees the same chance to respond to grace and come to true faith but they’ve got their religion on; claiming to know, to see, they’re blind and thus in sin.

The author and Jesuit Anthony de Mello once said, “on the day you cease to change you cease to live.” Working with God in our lives and in our world is a process of embracing the surprising movements of Grace that flow from Christ’s action towards us and in us at our baptism and at this table. Sometimes that process is messy or uncomfortable; last time I checked either having slime massaged into your face or being thrust into intense conflict isn’t all that enjoyable.

The invitation to change is open to all here today, no one here need remain in the smallness and self-righteousness of mere religion. Come journey the grandeurs of Grace, come believe in and worship the Son of Man.

Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see. Amen.