

“I was blind, but now I see”

April 3, 2011

Text: Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

I.

I was blind, but now I see!

With these affirming words, the man born blind in the reading I just shared with us—from John 9—responds to the those trying to explain how he, a man blind from birth, can now see.

Understandably, his neighbors and those who knew him are overcome with curiosity and seek an explanation. At first, they wonder if, in fact, he is the one. Some thought he was; others weren't sure.

Is this the one that used to sit and beg? They weren't sure.

People are in disbelief, trying to find answers. They ask the former blind man how this happened but, other than explaining how Jesus made mud, spread it on his eyes and told him to go wash in the pool at Siloam, he doesn't know.

- The man knows nothing about Jesus.
 - He only knows, ***I was blind, but now I see!***

II.

This healing is no small matter, as—quickly—the word spreads. And soon, the Pharisees get involved. To have this incredible healing attributed to Jesus isn't what they want to hear. And worse yet, it's the Sabbath, a day when a faithful Jew isn't supposed to do any work. And apparently, kneading the mud used for the healing is considered work.

However, trying to sort this out, the Pharisees themselves are soon divided—some of them saying, *How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?*

Finally, they ask the man again about his healing and what he has to say about this Jesus person. By now, he's had some time to think about it ... and he tells them: ***He must be a prophet.***

We can see the progression of faith building in the former blind man. Still, later, after being questioned a second time by the Pharisees, he's even more convinced that whoever Jesus is, he must be from God.

Never since the world began, he says, has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a

person born blind. He wouldn't have been able to do this if he were not from God.

Hard to argue with that! And soon after this, when he runs into Jesus, he confesses the belief that has been building up in him, saying: *Lord, I believe.*

III.

I was blind, but now I see is not just a statement of reality (the man was blind, but now he sees). It's also a statement of faith. More still, it's a statement that *grace happens ...* which means, our lives can change. None of us is forever constricted and held back by our present condition or circumstances.

It's a reminder that there's a difference between *before* and *after*—before grace happens and after. The man born blind cannot describe his conversion moment to anyone's satisfaction. But he can tell the difference it makes. For him, it makes all the difference in the world.

All I know, he tells the authorities, is that I was blind, but now I see.

If we give ourselves to the faith process and work at our faith (which is all about meeting God half way), *before* and *after* make all the difference. Not only is this the experience of the man born blind, it is also our experience.

Before and *after*: before grace happens and after; before a period of personal growth and learning and after.

1. Once I believed in a certain way about God and the Christian faith; now I believe something very different, with a much larger spirit.
2. Once I saw certain people, groups and religions in ways that emphasized our differences—differences of all kinds; now I see them in ways that illumine what we have in common.
3. Once I saw poverty and health care through the eyes of individual responsibility; now I see them through the eyes of compassion.
4. Once I saw our national interests in terms of *looking out for #1*; now I see our interests linked to multi-national cooperation—building coalitions, moving in harmony with the consent of the international community.

Before and *after* is what our faith journey is about. *I was blind, but now I see* is its own testimony, its own reality. It doesn't need explanation. It needs only to be confessed.

Popular Catholic theologian and author, **Frederick Buechner** once commented: *People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness*

there is a great light.

In other words, people are seldom ready for the *after part* of the *before and after* experience. We underestimate the power of the light that is itching to illumine us and change our lives.

IV.

Three centuries ago in the village of Olney, England, a new parish priest came to town. A man who had spent years as a slave trader, the new priest had a very personal style of preaching, full of compassion and energy. In no time, the village church overflowed with people eager to hear his compelling message.

In those days, it was fairly common for clergy to write original verses for congregational singing. In the months that followed, the new *priest at Olney* wrote a testimonial song referring to his own sordid past as a slave trader and to his remarkable conversion that followed.

One of his compositions was titled, *Faith's Review and Expectation*. It was a simple, humble and heartfelt poem. At first, it didn't make much of an impression but much later, having survived the priest, whose name was **John Henry Newton**, the autobiographical hymn found its way across the Atlantic and into the core of our American worship experience. The song's name: *Amazing Grace*.

In composing the hymn, John Newton had drawn on words from the Parable of the Prodigal Son and from John 9, our reading this morning.

*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.*

V.

Don't we all have things in life that we are blinded towards ... things that we don't see about others or about ourselves ... or about our families and communities? Put another way, don't we all have our blind spots?

Although our story from John this morning suggests that the congenital blindness of *the man born blind* was not a matter of blame or sin, still, blindness on matters of human rights and social justice can have severe, far-reaching consequences.

Again, so much of it is context—the context we've been born into. Our human biases and prejudices, however contradictory of God's purposes, can distort our vision and the

sway of our heart for decades and more.

Certainly, we've seen this throughout the history of our nation—in our nation's moral struggle with the stain of slavery, through the civil rights movement of the 50's, 60's, on into the second decade of the 21st century where, still, the stain in our national spirit leaves its mark.

While we can give thanks to God for the progress we have made, new sight and new seeing continue to invite us to higher spiritual ground—

- in ethnic and race relations, to be sure ...
 - but also in our advocacy of gay and lesbian rights ...
 - and with gender equality in the market place ... and on and on ...

In this season of Lent, when we are invited to take a sobering look at ourselves ... to spend time reflecting on our lives and sorting ourselves out ... we're reminded that we can always—each of us—learn to *see* better, *hear* better, and be more responsive to the call of inclusive love in the world around us.

I was blind, but now I see starts with me. It starts with each of us as believers.

*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.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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