

Blindness

The Gospel reading is another rather long story with multiple twists and turns. Because of that, I'm going to tell you the story rather than read it to you. Don't get too worried though, I'll try not to leave anything out, or put anything in that doesn't belong. This is actually the way a lot of the writings of the Scripture, especially the Old Testament, but also the Gospels, got their start, people telling each other the stories of God and Jesus. So listen, and hear, the Gospel according to John, according to Mark, but not the same Mark that is in the Bible, just this Mark.

The Telling:

Jesus is walking along and he sees a man born blind. It's important that the man was born blind, not that he became blind, because things like this were seen as judgments from God rather than as simply bad luck. Jesus's disciples are asking him about that very thing: "who sinned for that to happen?" Their assumption is that someone must have done something very wrong, because not being able to see, ever, must be about the most terrible punishment.

Jesus explains things a different way though. This blindness is not the result of sin, the man or his parent's sin, it is an opportunity for God's grace to shine through into the world. Because right now, Jesus is here, and while he's here it is the time and the place for miracles to shake things up and show things for what they are. His deeds are going to expose the darkness at the center of the world and the way things are.

So he takes some dirt and spit and makes mud and rubs it on the blind man's eyes and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam (which means sent). That particular pool is fed by the spring of Gihon through Hezekiah's tunnel, hewn through solid rock, and it is one of the reasons why the ancient city of Jerusalem managed to resist so many attacks and sieges. It's an important place, like Jesus is trying to make a statement as well as just heal this man.

Well sure enough, the man is healed and now can see, and that draws some attention, including some of the wrong kind of attention from people who already don't particularly like Jesus. These people are the people who were perfectly fine with this man begging by the side of the road every day, because surely he deserved to be afflicted somehow. In fact, they were so disturbed by the idea that this man could now see that they almost refused to believe it was him. Furthermore, they were angry that Jesus could have had the audacity to heal someone on the Sabbath day, which must surely mean that he is no holy man. The Sabbath was a sacred rule, a super-sacred rule, one of the top of the top rules, anyone who would violate that rule has got to be a sinner.

The man born blind says he doesn't know anything about Jesus, whether he's a sinner or not, he only knows that he was blind and now can see.

The Pharisees don't like that answer, so they call in the guy's parents and try to bully them into giving away something, some secret fact that will incriminate the man or Jesus or both. He really is a horrible person right? He has all sorts of degenerate qualities right? You two were a couple of wild ones back before he was born right? This blindness has got to be someone's fault! They don't want to get in trouble, so they stick to just the facts: he is our son, he was born blind. The facts are not okay with the Pharisees though, so they kick out the parents and haul the man back in.

The formerly blind man has apparently had the time to process some of what has happened, because this time he has some better answers. This time he's not quite as shocked and awed by what is going on, this time he answers their charges and their outrage: "all I know is that no person has ever given a person blind from birth their sight, only God could do that, and God doesn't listen to sinners, at least not that way. I know that my sight was given to me by God, and Jesus was the one whose spit made the mud and whose hands smeared it on my eyes and whose voice told me to go to Siloam and wash. That must be the work of God being done through him."

This was an outrage to the Pharisees, they could not accept that this man dared to lecture them on the logic of God's power and work in the world; that was their sandbox. They told him to get out and not to come back until he had realized that his gift of sight was actually an abomination.

Jesus heard about all this and went to find the man he had healed. He made a proper introduction, and the man acknowledged that Jesus was the source of his healing and the presence of God. Jesus told him, sounding very much like things the prophets had predicted, "I have come into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind."

A few Pharisees heard that and they just knew he was taking a shot at them. "Surely we're not blind, are we?" To which Jesus says, "Yes, and don't call me Shirley." Because they think they have all the answers, instead of looking at what the power of God has done right in front of them at the clear evidence, they remain separated from God and blind to what God is doing, which is the only true form of blindness.

The Commentary:

Can we get so attached to the rules and regulations of our religion that we are actually blind to God?

I mean that's the big question that's implied by this long story. Have we, as churchgoing Christians, stopped actually looking at the way Jesus dealt with the likes of us? Do we ask that question: "Surely we're not blind are we?" with the same sort of incredulous naivety?

There are two things that give away the blind hypocrisy of the religious folk. The first is lack of compassion for the suffering of another. They not only fail to see the life-changing gift God's grace to the blind man, but it actually makes them angry that grace may have been given to someone who didn't "deserve" it, by someone who was not playing by their rules. I have gone through a similar process with TV preachers, I despise the teachings of the prosperity gospel and I feel like thousands upon thousands of people are being led astray by these shiny-happy-preachers, but I have to watch my pharisaic moments. What if Benny Hinn (the guy in the shiny white suit who purportedly heals people and takes lots of their money) actually did heal people by the power of the Holy Spirit? What if it wasn't actually a scam? What if God's power was being mediated through that clay vessel. That is actually a possibility right? What if Joel Osteen brought someone who was lost and in despair back into the light of sanity and hope?

It may rub me the wrong way, but I should not let my own personal preferences get in the way of God's grace operating in the world, if it alleviates human pain and suffering and brings people into hope and faith, who am I to despise it. We should be all about opening up the kingdom of heaven to those who are walking in darkness. I'm aware of all the warnings about false teachers and knowing them by their fruits, yes, we need to be on the lookout for charlatans and "wolves," but our primary task is to be open

to the light of Christ in the world. First and foremost, before any other consideration, we should ask ourselves: is this something that can be done by the power of evil, or is this something that can only be of God? Is it generative and creative or corrosive and decaying?

That question leads us to the second blindness in this story: the blindness of cynicism. I think cynicism has overtaken us, as a church and honestly as a nation. We are distrustful of people and things that we do not understand and therefore we assume that they are nefarious. The Pharisees did not see the usual, expected patterns in Jesus. He wasn't the wild eyed prophet, the political revolutionary, or the serene teacher, he could be all of those or none of those. They had a terrible time defining what and who he actually was, so they focused on the one thing they could know: he was a rule breaker. He broke the Sabbath, he interrupted the natural order of things. His light was disruptive to their darkness, what's worse, it showed, time and time again, that what they had formerly claimed was light, was actually darkness.

The lack of compassion, the anger and resistance, these are just warning lights on the control panel. The underlying cause is actually their blindness. Their inability to see God's light.