

4 Lent – Year A – April 3, 2011
1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41
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Did you ever play the memory game with a tray of objects that you get to look at it for about ten seconds, before the tray is whisked away and you have to write down as many items as you can remember? Most of us don't do very well, because we have a hard time really seeing even what's right in front of us. Celtic writer, John O'Donohue, notes, "There are those who are physically blind; they have lived all their lives in a moonscape of darkness. They have never seen a wave, ... a flower, the sky, or the face of another human being. Yet there are others with perfect vision who are absolutely blind." That's a neat summary of today's Gospel lesson.

The implications of the opening lines are quite disturbing. It reads, "As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" Did you notice how the disciples regard the blind man. They don't see the man; they see a theological question mark, an object of indifference. In fact, their question may not even be a serious one, given that the teaching of the day was that sin and sickness are in a direct relationship of cause and effect. The sins of the fathers were also visited on their children. Jesus, like Job, firmly refutes the notion that physical suffering is necessarily God's punishment or judgment, or a direct effect of sin. The disciples don't see the person at all, just an object for their rhetorical question. Jesus' response is supposed to confirm their worldview, instead Jesus tells them that neither the man's nor his parents' sin is the cause of his blindness. Jesus' response is full of compassion. He sees the man in need, and decides to heal him in order to reveal God's glory. In doing so, Jesus confirms that He is the Light of the world, bringing sight to the blind, physically and spiritually.

Jesus heals the man's blindness, by spreading mud made with saliva on his eyes, and sending him to the pool of Siloam to wash. The pool's name means, "sent". Some suggest that the making of mud is the same creative act recounted in the Book of Genesis when God creates humanity from the dust of the earth. It certainly fits with our understanding of Jesus as fully divine, and our knowledge that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Washing in the pool reminds us of our baptismal healing and commitment to Christ Jesus. It also reminds us of the Great Commission, to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). John continues to connect key themes found throughout his Gospel, including, darkness, light, and Living water. Nicodemus comes in darkness and cannot see the light of the world. The Samaritan woman hears and sees Jesus, and becomes convinced that He is the savior of the world. The blind man regains his sight without ever seeing his healer. At first, he talks about Jesus as "the man". By the time the leaders of his synagogue have finished with him, he's naming Jesus as a prophet from God, and finally as Lord. The title Lord is used for God in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Just as baptism is the first step in our lifelong transformation as disciples of Jesus. In this part of our own story, this man's growing awareness – his expanded vision of Jesus – leads him to proclaim his belief in the Lord. The verb "to believe" also means to trust in Jesus. To be a disciple means to be in a relationship of faith and trust in Jesus our Lord. Conversion is just the beginning of the revelation of Jesus. The more we see, the more we are humbled, knowing that Jesus knows everything we have ever done, and sees right into our hearts. Paradoxically, the revelation of truth in Jesus brings the blessing of healing and forgiveness. Being empowered to see as Christ sees is a difficult transition for all of us. As O'Donohue says, "Many of have made our world so familiar that we do not see it anymore. [We need to understand] what criteria we use to decide what we want to see and to avoid seeing what we don't want to see. It's a startling truth that how we see and what we see determine how and who we will be." Lent is a great time to do some interior work on exploring how we view the world, and what filters we have in place in that vision.

O'Donohue suggests that there are seven styles of vision. "To a fearful eye, all is threatening.... To the greedy eye, everything can be possessed.... To the judgmental eye, everything is closed in definitive frames... it is always excluding and separating.... To the resentful eye everything is begrudged... we can never enjoy who we are or what we have.... To the indifferent eye, nothing calls or awakens.... To the inferior eye, everyone else is greater.... [But] to the loving eye, everything is real. This art of love is neither sentimental nor naïve. Such love is the greatest criterion of truth, celebration and reality."

God comes to each of us personally, and in a way that will draw us to Him. Like the blind man, my personal story of conversion also involves healing, and a kind of breech birth into God's kingdom. This is really just a teaser, because I plan to share that story with you during Holy Week on Maundy Thursday. The blind man is changed so radically, that his neighbors don't even recognize him anymore. They ask his parents if he's really the same man, and send him to the religious leaders. When questioned, the most the man's parents will say is that he's definitely their son, who was born blind. Did you notice the glaring absence of celebration that their son is now able to see? It's terribly sad to see fear overwhelm joy. Fortunately, the man is willing to stand up to the authorities, and pays the price for his belief. Seemingly unwilling to punish Jesus, beyond a major verbal backstabbing, including calling the Son of God a sinner, the religious leaders excommunicate the man, casting him out of the synagogue, and therefore out of the community of faith.

As a blind beggar, the man knew what it was to be dependent on others, and to be shunned as a sinner and an outcast. After the healing, he now sees the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who are trying desperately to hold on to the power to define sin and righteousness, and to dispense or withhold God's grace. Jesus re-enters the story in the last few verses, as the one who stands in solidarity with the outcast man. Jesus is the one, who again sees the man's need, refusing to let him wander in a wilderness of loneliness like a lost sheep. Instead, as the Good Shepherd he leads him into the fullness of faith, and draws him into the community of disciples. In doing so, Jesus points out that sin is the willful refusal to listen to the voice of God, and to recognize God's signs in and through Jesus. As it is elsewhere in the Gospel of John, the willful ignorance of the spiritual leaders is the sin here.

As our Lenten journey progresses, this reading challenges us to consider our own worldview, and where we are in the spectrum portrayed to us in this story. The worldview of the synagogue leaders begins and ends with their rules regarding the Sabbath. Their strict, legalistic outlook refuses to consider the spirit of the law, demanding observance of the letter of the law for the sake of righteousness. They fail to see the wider vision of God's grace, love and mercy. The blind man's vision begins with God. He insists that only a man of God can do such signs as healing one blind from birth. In this vision, we see and share in God's grace and healing, justice and compassion. In other words, we see God's good creation with loving eyes. With grateful hearts, our faith comes alive, and we feel compelled to offer ourselves in service to God and our neighbors. We celebrate and give thanks to God when we gather in worship and praise. We are strengthened for our mission through Christ's Body and Blood, as we share Holy Communion in remembrance of Him. Our journey of transformation moves us from walking in darkness and fear, to living in relationship with the Light of the world, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Amen.