

John 9:1-12
March 2, 2008

South Plains
4th Sunday of Lent

Blinded By Light

Here is a poor man, minding his own business which is begging because he's blind and that's the only way a blind man survives in first century Palestine. His parents and neighbors help out as much as they can, just they have done all his life. He was born blind. Now, in theory, everybody knows that when a person is born with a certain defect or deficit, it's not his fault. But, in practice, people wonder, "Did his parents do something wrong to cause him to be born blind?" Whether we blame genetics or poor prenatal care, we like to think there's an explanation for these things. Some people like to speculate in a more metaphysical way. They wonder, "Did this man himself commit some sin in a previous existence so that blindness is payback of some sort?"

Because Jesus is all about repentance and forgiveness of sin, naturally his disciples ask their master, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus refuses to get involved in the blame game. He accepts the situation as it is. This man, Jesus says, presents an opportunity where "God's works might be revealed in him." So Jesus heals the man born blind as a demonstration of what a difference it makes that Jesus is in the world as the "light of the world."

The University of Virginia and others in our community participate in "Make A Difference Day," one day in the year when people are encouraged to make a difference in their community by giving their time and talents. Next Sunday, we will dedicate our time and talents by making an offering of those TNT surveys that have been handed out. Here in John's gospel is a demonstration of how Jesus makes a difference in one man's life. The man is a sample of what it means when the light of the world shines on us.

The window beside my bed faces east which means I get to see the sunrise without getting out of bed. It also means, however, that when I go to my dresser in the morning, the dust is highlighted by the sunshine. No matter how much cleaning has been done the day before, every sunshiny morning, I see dust on the top of my dresser. This formerly blind man finds that receiving the light of the world is also a mixed blessing in his life. At least for a while, the gift of sight that enlightens brings problems.

First, his neighbors don't recognize him. "It's someone like him," they say. We can imagine that he moves a little more freely, a little more decisively. He's not asking for help, and he certainly doesn't have the humble attitude of a beggar anymore. It's funny how a little freedom, a little healing, a little different view of the world can make a person seem strange.

When he insists that he's the same person, just with new eyesight, they can't quite believe his explanation for the healing. Miracles, after all, wouldn't be miracles if they fit our expectations. The townspeople expected to see that blind man sitting helplessly on the same street forever. It is kind of nice to know someone who is truly needy and to be able to help that person occasionally with a few coins or some surplus food. Now, he doesn't need their help. They want to question this so-called miracle-worker. Where is he? If he's really that good, maybe he can take care of Timmy's cough and grandpa's gout.

You might suppose that the really religious people in town would rejoice in this miraculous healing. But, they are suspicious of any blessing that comes from outside the establishment. So, When he goes to the Pharisees, they ask him to explain the miracle all over again. And, there's a problem. The commandment against working on the Sabbath has been specified to prohibit kneading bread. When Jesus mixed spittle and dust to make mud, he was kneading the mud and therefore he was working on the Sabbath, and thus Jesus could not be doing "the works of God." The conclusion of the mainline religious people is that both Jesus and the formerly blind man must be frauds.

Even this man's parents are grilled about the legitimacy of this so-called miracle. They want no part of the controversy. They must distance themselves from their son, because anyone who says Jesus is the

Messiah has been threatened with excommunication. They put the monkey on their son's back. "Ask him yourself," they tell the Pharisees. He's old enough to speak for himself.

Jesus realizes that the gift of sight is causing trouble for this poor man. I suppose he could have reversed the miracle so that the poor man became blind again and could fit in to his old place in the community. Instead, Jesus seeks him out and asks one question. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man may have been blind all his life, but he's no dummy. He replies with a question of his own, "Who is he?" Jesus says simply, "You have seen him." Finally, someone in this story gets the point. The man confesses his faith and worships Jesus.

Every Sunday when we stand up to repeat the Apostles Creed or some other affirmation of faith, we are called upon to answer a similar question. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Most of us, rightly or wrongly, will take our answer for granted and repeat the creed. This little story of a healing raises a host of other questions that are implied in the invitation to confess our faith:

Does it make any difference that we know the identity of the Son of Man?

Does it matter that we believe in him?

Does the light of the world shine through our lives and make a difference?

Do we move more freely, more happily?

Do we see any better the world any better than we did before?

The reason we keep returning to the gospel stories about Jesus is so that we won't forget what a difference he makes in the world. It's the same reason we look to the sunrise and sunset. The light of the sun, the light of the world, makes all the difference. We don't want to forget that.