

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church
Fourth Sunday in Lent
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BELIEVING IS SEEING

John 9:1–41

The story of the man who was born blind, which takes up the entire Chapter 9 in the Gospel of John, is beautifully crafted. It is a favorite story of mine, and I hope of yours as well. For me, it captures much of the essence of the Gospel story.

First of all, let us notice something interesting about the structure of the story. Jesus appears at the beginning of the story and at the end, but not in the middle. At the beginning, he heals the man born blind, and then he leaves the scene, and the man, who now can see, is left to fend for himself.

Some have said that this reflects the situation faced by the early church. Jesus carries out his ministry among the people, journeys to Jerusalem, is put to death at the hands of the Roman authorities at the urging of the leaders of the Jerusalem Temple, and then is raised by God to new life. Jesus then departs, leaving the community of his followers to fend for itself in a culture that is hostile to the good news of the Gospel. The early Christians not only face opposition from the Roman government, but they also come into conflict with the Jewish religious establishment and suffer the same fate as the man who was born blind—they are expelled from Jewish synagogues.

At the end of the story about the man born blind, Jesus returns to the man, and the man’s newfound faith is confirmed in his presence. As so it was that the early Christian community lived in the hope that Jesus would return to them to bring to fruition the newness of life they had been granted by the grace of God.

In the meanwhile, the church’s faith, in the absence of the human Jesus, was tested and tried. The story of the man born blind illustrates the difficulties faced by the early Christian community. He encounters opposition every step of the way. But he has received his sight and has set forth on a journey by which his newfound faith is deepened and nurtured.

Formerly a human being bent over and limited by blindness, he is now strengthened in the grace of God, and stands upright, facing his opposition head-on. He once was blind, but now can see.

In between the healing of the man and the return of Jesus at the end of the story, there are four scenes, each of which are instructive.¹ In scene one, the healed man tries to go home again. But he cannot. So changed is his appearance that no one in the old neighborhood can recognize him. Who is he? And who is the one who healed him? Where is he? “I do not know.” There is no celebration and no welcome home. There are only questions and doubts.

In scene two, the healed man must face the religious leaders. They are most certainly interested in all reported miracles, but this one was accomplished on the Sabbath, and according to Jewish religious law, no healing must be done on the Sabbath, for healing was viewed as work. They ask the man how he received his sight and who healed him. The man gives a straightforward answer, but some of the Pharisees declare that Jesus cannot be from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath, and others openly declare Jesus to be a sinner, but how can a sinner perform miracles?

The evidence is insufficient, so in scene three, the religious leaders grill the parents. Yes, he is our son; yes, he was born blind and now he can see; but beyond that, we know nothing. Nor do we know who did it. The poor man receives no support from his own parents. Whatever joy they may have had over the healing of their son, they are now filled with fear. They are unwilling to uphold their son at the cost of being expelled from the synagogue. How very sad.

In the final scene, the religious leaders again question the man who was born blind, and this time the questioning becomes more intense. The Pharisees try to make the man denounce Jesus as a sinner. But he can now see, and how can the man who healed him be a sinner? Anger and disbelief prevail among the Pharisees. The man is denounced along with Jesus and expelled as a sinner. Finally, Jesus returns, and not too late. The man is confirmed in his newfound faith.

¹ For the description of the four scenes, I am indebted to Fred Craddock’s article, “Coping in Jesus’ Absence, which appeared in the March 14, 1990 issue of *The Christian Century*.

What lessons can we draw from this amazing story? Probably many lessons can be drawn, but I will mention only three.

First, this story represents a judgment against religion, and inasmuch as we are religious people, the story may represent a judgment upon us. Religious life, whether it be the rules by which we live and which we attribute to God, or the way we define sin and who is inside and outside the realm of God's grace—all of these can become our attempts to control the life of the church, and perhaps even God. This was the way the religious leaders in the story practiced their religion. But God is always upsetting our little worlds. Or, as the hymn "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" states, "The love of God is beyond the measure of our minds." God is continually breaking down the walls we erect. God is continually breaking up our religious ways. This is what happens in the story. Through Jesus, the blind man receives sight, and this healing is an event over which the religious leaders have no control, and they become upset. In their view, sin is attributed to the man who received his sight (did sin cause his blindness in the first place?) and to Jesus who healed him, whereas it is really the religious leaders who are sinners in need of God's grace. They are the ones who cannot see. May our prayer be that we never allow our religious views to be confused with the ways of God. May we always hear the words God pronounces through the prophet Isaiah:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

—Isa 55: 8–9

Second, this story says that becoming a Christian (and I suspect we are all in the process of *becoming* Christians) is not an easy path to take. Sometimes, I think we have this idea that if we become a Christian, joy will abound, everything will be solved, and the way will be easy. Not so. The man born blind, once he received his sight, encounters one difficulty after another. He faces opposition and banishment. He is not welcomed at home. The religious leaders reject him as a beloved child of God. And yet, for him, nothing could be more important than believing in Jesus, and so he is willing to face his enemies. In facing his opposition, he simply tells the truth, "I once was blind but now I see." And then he lets it rest at that. For the man

born blind, and for Jesus himself, the way was difficult. For them there could be no newness of life apart from the way of the cross. As it was for them, so it is for us. Without the cross, there can be no newness of life.

And third, there is a wonderful interplay in this story between seeing and believing. We have heard the conventional wisdom, “seeing is believing.” But in this story, *believing is seeing*. To believe in Jesus is to see rightly. The man born blind receives his physical sight, but the story involves so much more than a restoration of physical sight. There is another seeing that is at work here, far more important than physical seeing. This is the seeing that comes from believing in Jesus. Believing in Jesus enables the blind man to see things truly: the falsehoods which can so easily arise with religion, against which he takes a stand; the cost of discipleship, which he is willing to accept for the sake of the joy that awaits him. Believing causes him to see Jesus not as a sinner, or even just as a prophet, but as the Christ. Believing in Jesus causes him to see in a new way. And I trust that believing in Jesus will enable us to see in a new way, To see injustice for what it really is—injustice—and oppression for what it really is—oppression—and evil for what it really is—evil—and suffering for what it really is—suffering. I trust that believing in Jesus will enable us to see God’s love at work in our lives and in the life of the world, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, to see that we are God’s beloved sons and daughters even when others cause us to doubt our inner worth. Yes, believing is seeing.

My sisters and brothers, let us never forget the story of the man born blind. Let us return to it whenever our own faith grows tired and we become blind to God’s expansive grace in our lives and in the lives of others. For it is a story that can speak to us, not only this day, but throughout all of life’s journey. Thanks be to God. Amen.