

We See What We Want to See

John 9:1-12

I am a man who was born blind. If I were to remove my eyeglasses, it would be obvious that I identify with the plight of the blind man in this story from John's Gospel (although, functionally, some might extend that blindness to other matters as well).

I didn't realize how blind I was until grade school when I had trouble reading the blackboard or the expression of the teacher from across the room. After a visit to the eye doctor, I learned I was plagued with a common defect called, "lazy" eye—astigmatism to be precise—which, when presented to me at the time, implied it was the result of being lazy, a scornful term normally used in my presence by my parents when assessing the resident hygiene of my bedroom. So at eleven years of age, I left the optometrist that day convinced that God was punishing me for not cleaning up my room by cursing me with a *lazy eye*!

In spite of my myopic theology, my relative blindness was a social handicap. My schoolteachers would frown when I misread numbers while doing arithmetic or consider me a rather ungifted child when I couldn't tell the difference between an exclamation point and question mark during the grammar lesson. My elementary school girlfriends were routinely insulted by my squinty-eyed reaction to their goo-goo eyes from across the classroom, which rendered my childhood romances shallow and short-lived. When I was instructed to wear a patch over my good eye to supposedly strengthen the "lazy" one (which made no sense to me since it didn't take into account all

the unforeseen objects I subsequently bumped into), I looked more like “Cyclops” than a swashbuckling pirate from the Caribbean!

I have to admit, my personal dignity didn’t improve when I was finally fitted with glasses, because back then the best looking options were a straight path to geekdom. At that age, I wanted to look dashing and debonair, but instead I looked like a dork with Coke-bottle, horn-rimmed glasses (nowadays, I’d be a trendy hipster). Likewise, wearing glasses was an aggravation while playing baseball or basketball, as I’d pop a lens and lose it or break the frames and be forced to patch them together with glue and masking tape and appear even more the nerd that I was morphing into. Being a pimply-faced preacher’s kid with goofball glasses isn’t a cherished memory of my post-pubescent years.

To see or not to see has always been the question, of course, though I have to put my regrets into perspective. At least wearing glasses enables me to see what I can see. In biblical times, a trip to the eye doctor wasn’t even an option. Corrective lenses in the form of eyeglasses weren’t invented until the 13th century. So prior to that those suffering from myopia, far-sightedness, astigmatism, cataracts, glaucoma, or any of a number of diseases affecting vision, had to live with it. They were, for all intents and purposes, functionally blind.

To add to this burden in a pre-scientific era, ancient minds pondered the cause of blindness and typically deduced it to be a matter of moral purity which, though strange to our thinking, was a relatively logical conclusion to make. It was based on an assumption that vision was the result of light within a person. In effect, people

could see because the light inside them made it possible. As historian, Bruce Malina, explains:

In antiquity light was “stuff.” It was an entity with no source other than itself... The light in a human being, which was “living” light as opposed to the light of the sky, derived from the heart and emerged in the eyes in the seeing process. The eyes were made of fire, the “stuff” that causes light, and it was this fire that emanated from the eyes that enabled a person to see. As Aristotle said, “[V]ision is fire” (*Problems* 31.959b; “Sight [is made] from fire and hearing from air (960a). To be blind was to have eyes from which darkness emanated; darkness was the presence of dark...rather than the absence of light. Blind people were those...whose hearts were full of darkness, hence, from whose eyes “dark” emanated. The blind were often suspected of having the evil eye (Matt. 6:22-23).¹

We can appreciate the logic of this assessment, but also the terrible implications and false judgments derived from it. If you were a good person, if your spirit was pure and well, then you could see clearly. If you were not, then your impaired vision would serve as evidence of the darkness within you. This helps to explain Matthew 6 where we read these words:

The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (vv. 22, 23)

The moral state of one’s life was assessed on the state of your ability to see.

This made perfect sense, given that the usual diminishing of sight from childhood through adulthood was considered to correspond with the moral decline of individuals over time from innocence to guilt. Human sin was believed to cause suffering. So as people aged, the loss of innocence meant more suffering and diminished vision. It was a formulaic way of judging the moral state

¹ Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 1998, pg. 170.

of a person's life. (Clearly, some of us wouldn't have fared very well under those rules!)

In any case, this may give us insight into the story about the young man born blind, which is one of a series of intriguing episodes in John's gospel that illustrate the transformative experiences those on the underside of life had with Jesus (e.g., Samaritan woman, the lame man, the woman accused of adultery, Lazarus, etc.). These were stories meant to shake up and counter the social and cultural prejudices commonly used against those who were poor or poor in spirit—those who were marginalized with a stigma of shame. This episode falls in the midst of all of them with a rather extended tale about a man blind from birth, which in full covers the entire ninth chapter of John.

Right from the outset we get an immediate sense of what will be the developing irony of this passage. Jesus' disciples ask him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" You see how the moral equation worked: the man was born blind, so obviously someone was responsible—someone sinned—a cause-and-effect moral explanation. The light was out in his soul and he was full of darkness.

To his credit, Jesus disputed that, but not necessarily with an answer with which we'd be completely comfortable. Jesus responded: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." So, even though the family members weren't responsible for this man's blindness, somehow God was.

Honestly, I don't know if this was Jesus himself or the Gospel writer arriving at this conclusion. But it's another example of the cause-and-effect formula, where it merely shifts the blame onto God for this man's physical and social suffering in the world. Now I recognize this isn't an uncommon form of moral logic; many people believe that God causes suffering for a purpose. I don't happen to be one of them, as I think we were made mortal with all of its vulnerabilities and consequences, so God *responds* to bring meaning and purpose out of the meaningless and randomness of human suffering, rather than purposefully cause it. So I attribute this response of Jesus' to the gospel writer.

In any case, the story unfolds and, akin to a folk healer, Jesus brewed up a homemade concoction of mud moistened by spit and then healed the man by having him wash in the pool of Siloam. Thus, like the beloved hymn tells it, this man once was blind, but now could see!

If this story were only about miracle-making, we could leave it alone, since it's relevance to our lives would be limited, even as it plays out with all the characters investigating and critiquing how it was that a man like this could be healed.

However, there is a teachable take away, which are the judgments people make of each other—something that hasn't changed throughout the course of time. Below the surface, there is a message about the human propensity to see only what we want to see. It's a morality tale for how prejudices, biases, judgments, stereotypes, and simplisms are used to explain away why certain people are the way they are. That's a problem universal to human character,

whether or not we're entirely aware of how it factors into our own judgments of others.

As I see it, it often comes down to what we cite to fault in others. We recognize something in a person or in a group that annoys, irritates, or disgusts us—something that we don't believe is true of ourselves or with those with whom we associate. It gets expressed through certain qualifiers, be they racial, ethnic, gender-related, religious, social, economic, political, etc.—descriptors that are, in fact, subtle insults to set the person we're referencing apart from ourselves or those we value. It's a judgment we make about someone we don't like.

You and I often hear things like, "I'm not racist [or homophobic], but did you see that [fill in the blank]?" Or terms like, "that Jew", "those Muslims", "those druggies", "those greedy lawyers," etc.—whatever your target group might be. Oscar Wilde wisely sliced through human pretense when he said, "Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike." (ouch!)

Every day we hear or offer commentary or wise cracks that in some way intentionally disparages another or makes a caricature of them because there is something we don't like. We may even make derogatory judgments about cause-and-effect based on such caricatures and stereotypes. People can be blamed for their problems or their suffering, situations can be interpreted hastily based on feelings instead of facts, and a lack of empathy and compassion can exist simply because we don't like someone. In the combustible world

of politics and prejudice, it gets outright ugly and often dangerous. Prejudice is the bedrock of hate crimes.

I'm not overstating the point of this story in John's Gospel, for like this man who was blamed for his blindness, sometimes our assumptions about others are just plain wrong, no matter how logical they appear or and how often they get repeated. Prejudice always seems logical and justified to the purveyor of it.

That's where wisdom needs to intervene. Everyone's personal views and experiences are limited; they are not the truest, most comprehensive perspective upon which to make an infallible judgment. Wisdom would even dare us to encounter and learn about the people we judge, to challenge our own preconceived notions, so that we might find, like this man born blind, it isn't the one we target who has sinned all along—it's those who have been mercilessly mean with their pre-conceived judgments and thoughtlessness.

The point of this story was those who could not accept the healing of this man were the truly blind ones! How ironic is that! Yet, how true it often is. People who see only what they want to see are usually the most blind of all!

H.L. Mencken was spot on when he wrote: "Criticism is prejudice made plausible." In our criticism of others, we must recognize the possibility, if not probability, of our own prejudice preventing us to see things accurately and certainly empathetically. How revealing our criticism of others is of our own moral blindness and our need for "corrective lenses!"

Jesus' words speak even more bluntly: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be

judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.” Or more positively, do to others only what you would like done to yourself. That’s the moral formula that makes the most sense in human affairs.

The best hope we have in all we say and do is that we see what we *need* to see, so that we will always judge, and be judged, with mercy.

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30 March 2014