

Lent 4A Sermon 030208  
1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23  
Ephesians 5:8-14 ; John 9:1-41

I read a story the other day about two blind men who had both been healed by Jesus. They happened to meet one day, and each was so excited to meet someone else who had been healed. They talked about the wonder of sight, the color of flowers, the glory of sunrises, the faces of children and grandchildren. They talked about the power of having seen the face of Jesus. They were laughing and having a great time together, when one of them said, “And do you remember how Jesus took spit, made mud, and put it into your eye?” The other guy looked kind of stunned, and answered, “Why no, he just said, ‘Receive your sight,’ and I could see.”

The first man said, “Wait a minute. You mean he didn’t use any mud?”

“No.”

“Well, did he at least have you wash in the pool of Siloam?”

“No, of course not. Who ever heard of anything as ridiculous as mud in your eye, washed off in the pool?”

“Well,” said the first man, “if he didn’t put mud in your eyes and have you wash in the pool of Siloam, you are still blind! Blind - do your hear me? Because that’s the way Jesus healed me; that’s the way he does it!”

Then the second man began to get angry. He shouted, “Mud, mud! Who ever heard of using mud?! That’s the dumbest thing I have ever heard! You still have mud in your eyes. You’re the one who’s still blind!”

They got into a big argument - their relationship was destroyed, and right then and there, they formed the first two denominations: the Mudites and the Antimudites!

So ... who’s blind now?

This story from John’s Gospel is long and detailed. But what stood out for me this week was the discussion of blindness – its causes, its cures and whose blindness remains. Jesus and the disciples see the man, blind from birth and the disciples want to know whose *fault* his blindness is. Note the question they’re asking – was this his fault or the fault of his parents? In other words, did this man commit some sin, while he was still inside his mother’s womb that caused him to be born blind? What a question that is. As this country continues to debate the issue of abortion rights, the ability of a fetus to sin would put a whole new wrinkle into the discussion, but that’s a sermon for another day.

The disciples asking this question of Jesus is the start of a multi-part story here. Jesus tells his listeners that neither the man nor his parents had *caused* his problem – meaning that their entire line of questioning was wrong. What He could have told them was, “It’s nobody’s fault. God didn’t make this man blind as a punishment. This particular blind man has come to us so that *you* can be made to see. Now open your eyes and watch this.”

Then we get the wonderful interaction between Jesus and the blind man. Jesus spits in the dirt and creates mud to put on the man's eyes – as if it were a magic poultice. It is this act – spitting in the dirt and rubbing mud on the man's eyes that causes Jesus to run afoul of the Pharisees in this story. Remember that John tells us it was the Sabbath. And on the Sabbath one was allowed to do *no* work at all. It was the day of rest. Jesus' mixing dirt and saliva and spreading it on the man's eyelids was *work*. Had Jesus just sat still and told the man that his sight had been restored, we might never have gotten to the real exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus. But He did it and so we get the rest of the story.

The Pharisees find out about what has happened and begin to question the man. They want him to tell them that Jesus is a sinner, or somehow has gotten his power from someplace other than God. But the man says, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." Then the Pharisees invoke the name of Moses – the chief cornerstone of their faith – and tell the man that they have no idea where Jesus comes from, with the implication being, "but we're pretty sure it's not from Moses, like us." So ... who was blind?

The Pharisees, in this story and others, represented the stiff-necked, change-resistant people of Israel who, no matter what they witnessed or heard told, remained blind to the Good News of Christ Jesus. By this time in John's story, Jesus has been travelling around the region for some time and has performed a dozen or so miracles,

including changing water into wine, healing people of various diseases and feeding 5,000 with a few fish and loaves of bread. There had been numerous opportunities for the Pharisees to take a look at Him and discern for themselves whether they thought He was the Incarnation of God, or just a political messiah. But each time they looked, they saw nothing – they saw with the eyes of religious authority, not with the eyes of faith. Who’s blind?

Priest, professor, preacher and writer extraordinaire, Barbara Brown Taylor says that the Pharisees in this story, in their eternal hunt to root out sinfulness, committed the bigger sin. She says that this story points out a very important question for us to consider.

“Not ‘what if it is not God and I believe that it is’ but ‘What if it is God and I believe that it is not?’ That is the one question the Pharisees forgot to ask. They were so sure of everything – that God did not work on Sundays, that Moses was God’s only spokesman, that anyone born blind had to be a sinner, and ditto for anyone who broke the Sabbath; that God did not work through sinners, that God did not work on sinners, and that furthermore no one could teach them anything.<sup>1</sup>”

Thanks be to God that today those Pharisees aren’t around, huh? Those people who were faced with the signs and wonders of God Incarnate in their lives and yet couldn’t see who and what Jesus was. They who were so clueless that they bordered on hopeless. I am so thankful that we don’t have Pharisees around today. But then again ....

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, in *The Christian Century* (March 6, 1996) p. 260.  
Fr. John Bedingfield

We *all* have our little pharisaical blind spots, don't we? I mean, if we really look into our hearts, if we allow Jesus – the light of life – to shine on us, and we can really examine our lives and look to see where we act pharisaically, we can see that this blindness affects us all. It's OK. Go ahead and take a look at your own life. God already knows, so it's a matter of allowing our own eyes to be open to our blind spots.

For instance, how about those folks who say, “we can't do that here, because we've always done it this way?” Isn't that resistance to any sort of change, in the name of purity of religious tradition exactly what The Rev. Brown Taylor talked about? “What if it IS God and I don't believe?” That's a tough one for us to face. We're good people. We try to follow the rules and get a handle on what it is God wants from us. We try and struggle to do the right things, so don't tell us that some completely different thing might *also* be from God. And that's the important thing here. Also – both/and – not either/or.

The Pharisees in this story weren't wrong for being the teachers and protectors of Jewish law. Most of them were probably very good and devout men who spent a lifetime devoted to their faith and trying to keep it pure. BUT ... when Jesus, this brand new picture of God in the world came along, they closed the eyes of their hearts – they figuratively plucked out their own eyes – rather than see that even as their faith went along, something new could *also* be happening in the interaction between God and humanity. “What if it IS God and I don't believe?” Who's blind now?

Here is one example out of my life of many examples. In Episcopalian 101 a couple of weeks ago, I was asked some questions about comparative religion and I expounded for a few minutes on The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. In my off-the-cuff remarks, I said that what bothered me was that the Mormon Church pretended to be Christian in order to make themselves more acceptable in this predominantly Christian country. I still believe that to be true, but I also left the impression with the class that I didn't believe Mormonism to be "of God," and for giving that impression, I apologize.

I have a definition of Christianity. Right or wrong, I have in my mind what constitutes Christianity. I do NOT, however, know the mind of God. No one does. As the Psalmist says, God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and we cannot attain to God thoughts. But sometimes I let my self-important, pharisaical nature make me think I'm God. How God chooses to do God's work – and through whom God chooses to do the work of salvation – is not for me to determine. The Pharisees thought God could not work through sinners or on sinners. I implied that God could not work through Mormons. What if it IS God, and I don't believe? Who would be blind then?

Amen.