

I Can See

John 9:1-41

As he 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?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.” They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.” The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received

his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

Today's Gospel provides a classic example of a relatively simple story turned unnecessarily complicated. The core of the narrative is simply

that Jesus made a blind man to see. And it's couched in wonderful symmetry and symbolism. Just as the Genesis account of creation has God creating Adam out of the dust, so too Jesus uses dust to bring sight to the blind man. But it's dust intermixed with spittle, so there's this lovely tactile quality to the narrative, one that is earthy and human and intimate at the same time.

The man blind from birth who could now see because of Jesus, declares: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

If that were all there were to the story, we could pack our things and head to coffee hour. But there's much more going on here. Some years ago, when I was entertaining aspirations about becoming a professional photographer, I attended a weekend photography school, where one of the instructors, talking about the composition of a photograph, counseled us to avoid clutter, to train the camera on what was truly important in the scene. Too many photographs, he said, contain extraneous detail – what he called too much noise.

Today's Gospel contains too much noise.

Jesus and his disciples were walking along when they encountered a blind man. Jesus' immediate concern is with the man's blindness, but the disciples, still mired in an old, legalistic way of thinking, want to know who's at fault for his blindness. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" they asked. Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Jesus is more interested in curing the blindness than assigning blame. He spits on the ground, wipes the mud onto the man's eyes, and instructs him to wash in a pool. The man returns with the ability to see, much to the astonishment of everyone, especially those who recognized the man as a beggar.

Again, if that were the end of the story, it would be pretty simple. But it's not the end of the story. How did this happen, the crowd wanted to know. The formerly blind man patiently recounted the story, and then the Pharisees get involved.

Whenever the Pharisees show up in the New Testament, there's usually trouble afoot. They stroked their beards and launched their own inquiry. How did this happen, they asked. Once again, the formerly blind man recounted his story, and about now I can imagine him growing a tad impatient. Here he had been blind all of his life, and Jesus gave him sight. I suspect he wanted to go sightseeing or catch a movie rather than stand around repeating the same story over and over again. Where is this Sea of Galilee that everybody talks about?

But the Pharisees, noting it was the Sabbath, pressed further. Did Jesus do this on the Sabbath, they asked. Sure enough. Well then, they harrumphed. If Jesus healed on the Sabbath, then he broke the law and he could never be reckoned a prophet. Don't you agree, blind man, they asked.

Seems like a prophet to me, the formerly blind man said. I was blind, but now I see.

And then the parents get involved in the story. Was your son really blind from birth, the Pharisees asked. And you can see that the story – this simple story of a blind man who received his sight – is getting out of hand.

Too much noise.

I wonder if there's a lesson here for us, the followers of Jesus. I wonder if sometimes we don't make the faith too complicated. The Genesis account of creation, for example. Is it literal truth, or is it a story that helps us understand something important about the nature of God, humanity, and the created order? Did Moses really part the Red Sea? Did the sun literally stand still for Gideon in his battle against the Midianites? And, shifting to

the New Testament, what about this stuff about the virgin birth and all of the miracles? Water into wine? What are we, reasonably intelligent people that we are, supposed to make of all this?

And the resurrection? Did that really happen the way it says in the Bible? Finally, what do we make of all the apocalyptic writings at the end of the New Testament? Was the book of Revelation really a condemnation of Roman rule, or should we read it as a prophecy of things to come – vials of judgment, seas turned to blood, seven-headed dragons, and all that?

I can imagine the formerly blind man right about now saying, “Wait a minute! I really don’t care about all of that – or about whether Jesus should have healed me on the Sabbath. What did you want him to do? Come back the next day and finish the job? No.” The formerly blind man looks into the eyes of the Pharisees and continues: “I don’t know for sure whether he’s a prophet or not or whether he should have healed on the Sabbath or whether or not my blindness was a consequence of sin.” And then he takes a breath and says, “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

For those of us who have been touched by Jesus, who know his transformative power, all of these other questions fade into insignificance. Too much noise. And we can say with the formerly blind man, “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

Fourth Sunday in Lent

April 3, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut