

## “The Face of Love Loving us to Sight”<sup>1</sup>

March 30, 2014

I

This is the story of a man who was born blind. And it's also the story of religious folks who had absolutely no expectations. No thoughts that God's gonna do anything different. See, here's the scene.

There's a man sitting by the road. He's blind; maybe begging. Now the disciples see the man and apparently they don't expect anything to happen, you know, for him to be healed, for anything to be different. What they do want is to discuss it. “Who's sinned here, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Now of course, that was a very common opinion in those days ... and by the way, for some folks today. I mean, if anything goes wrong in your life, you must have done something to cause it.

But back to the disciples. Seems it didn't occur to them to help the guy, certainly didn't expect Jesus to change the man's condition. But they wanted to discuss it!! So rather than see the Kingdom of God coming near, they want a discussion group instead.

I mean, isn't it interesting? Who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind? What's your view on this, Jesus? So here they are. And nothing's going to happen. And see, the funny thing is – apparently the man himself didn't expect anything to happen either. I mean, he's just sitting by the side of the road, and I think you have to remember here that he doesn't say, “Jesus have mercy on me, Jesus heal me.” No. In fact, he doesn't even know it's Jesus! And at this point in the story, he sure doesn't believe in Jesus.

So maybe the point right here is that God not only answers prayers, but God answers some folks who don't even pray – maybe even occasionally doing something for you – for me – something we didn't even ask for.

Anyway, the blind man here finds himself suddenly under instructions – told to “go wash” – and then his eyes are opened.

So he didn't ask for the blessing, but now he can see and he starts for home.

So ... next scene.

The neighbor's looking out the window.

“Is that our blind neighbor?”

“Well, it looks like him.”

Others said, “No, no, that’s not the one.” Notice how he walks. He doesn’t have his dog or his cane.”

“Well it sure looks like him. Does he have a brother?”

“No, I believe that’s the same guy.”

“But it can’t be the same guy; the other one’s been blind since he was born.”

And so on.

So it never occurred to his neighbors – probably all good religious folks by the way – it never occurred to them that he could be healed. Not even once.

So then ... next scene, his family.

So some go to the family and they ask, “Is this your son?” “Yes.” “Born blind?” “Yes.” “Can he now see?”

“Look, we’re not in on this; he’s grown, let him answer for himself. We’re not in on this.” “Ask him.” “Keep us out of this,” not wanting to get involved in the controversy.

So the controversy circles back to the Pharisees. Now someone once said, “If you want to make enemies, try to change something.” And these religious authorities obviously took no delight in this possible healing. I mean, all highly irregular! Not acceptable at all in their sight. I mean, they are offended. Why? Why would that be the case?

Well, here’s one thought: theirs is a kind of nearsightedness common to folks of all religions who’ve made traditions, dogma, and duty more important than God. I mean, the activity of God must be according to their understanding ... and fit within their prejudices, or else it’s invalid. In other words, there’s no God larger than their own concept of God. It’s a classic case of God-in-a-box. And not just any box. My box!

So translated into the story, this thinking goes like this: God could not actually be working through a Sabbath-breaker, through a sinner ... in other words, Jesus. There must be some mistake. So they basically deny the reality of God in another’s life. So that healing really did not take place. The man is only faking sight.

Now let's think. I think the underlying truth in the story for you and me – this ironic truth – is that these seemingly holy Pharisees – earnest, pious to a fault, sincere folks ... refuse to see the reality of God right before their eyes. Yet the once-blind beggar, “born entirely in sin” as they see it, never wavers in his belief. In fact, over the course of their questioning, his faith seems to grow stronger — based on his own experience of the healing that's happened to him. “All I know is that now I see!” – to his surprise and amazement.

So the willful blindness of those who should have seen is contrasted with the willing faith of the blind man who, blind from birth, now sees with eyes wide open the reality of God standing right in front of him.

## II

O.K. now. Let's step back for a minute and again think about all this. The blind man comes to faith based on his unshakable personal experience. He now KNOWS in a way that he had never experienced before.

But now I want to insert a caution here before I go any further. So ... a cautionary question: Am I suggesting that we should always honor the demands of anyone claiming to see the light? Or in other words, does anything go? I mean, what about the suicide bombers who firmly believe in their true light to kill innocent folks?

Well, I hope I make my point. Personal experience and conviction alone are not enough to prove the right of God's truth. So before I go back to this morning's story, I'll remind you that scripture says, “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God.”

So a question: How do you and I test the spirits? Well my simple answer is by the rule of love. I mean, we can talk about it. It's probably a bit more complex. But that's my simple answer. Whatever's consistent with the love of God and the love of neighbor belongs to the light. Whatever is inconsistent with the love of God and the love of neighbor belongs to the devil ... or human evil ... or however you want to characterize the dark.

So not everything goes. But the loving healing here in this story is a mark of God's grace.

So getting back to our blind guy here, it seems to me that his conviction was one born of healing, of wholeness unexpectedly showered down on him by the One who came back ... who came back to stand before him ... now that he *could* look up and see the Face of Love bending near to him and loving him to sight.

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And you know – this all makes me wonder. I mean, I wonder if maybe you know how that is. Maybe it's happened in your life ... my life too. Maybe sometimes when things seem the darkest, I mean, when they do seem the darkest ... suddenly it's as if a Light has broken through – and with it a sense of peace you can't quite put into words. But somehow you know, deep down that no matter what, life is good. You are loved.

So just maybe ... maybe you then open yourself to the risk of being healed ... of being made new.

### III

New, see. Not perfect. As someone recently wrote, “new is often messy. New looks like recovering alcoholics. New looks like reconciliation between family members who don't actually deserve it. New looks like every time I manage to admit I was wrong and every time I manage to not mention when I'm right. New looks like very fresh start and every act of forgiveness. New is the thing we never saw coming — never even hoped for — like our blind guy here. But ends up being what I needed all along.”

She says, “God simply keeps reaching down ... reaching down into the dirt of your humanity and resurrecting you from the graves you dig for yourself through your violence, your lies, your selfishness, your arrogance, and your addictions. And God keeps loving you back to life over and over.” And, she says, “There are times when faith feels like a friendship with God. But there are other times when it feels ... I don't know ... more vacant. Yet none of that matters in the end. How you feel about Jesus or how close you feel to God is meaningless next to how God acts upon you. How God indeed enters into your messy life and loves you through it, maybe whether you want God's help or not.”

So despite the fact that the blind guy here didn't seek out Jesus or ask his help, he was still healed and made whole in the end.

Well, finally, here's my question. To see or not to see. How will you have it? What will any of us do? 'Cause in the end, that's what this is all about. To see or not.

Oh, you can stay where you are. You can sit in your familiar dark, where all the edges are rounded off so that you'll not hurt yourself when you stumble – sit in the dark where you need only concern yourself with what's already within your

reach. No sense getting your hopes up; no sense thinking of yourself as a person who might come to see. Stay with what you know – like those Pharisees in today’s story.

Or ... you can open yourself to what ... to Who might be right in front of you, you can open your eyes wide, you can bracket the caution, shove the fear aside ... turn your back on all that’s kept you crouching in the dark ... and see what awaits you.

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So, are you willing to see or not? And if you’re willing, are you willing to see *everything* there is, the good along with the awful in yourself, the good along with the awful in everyone you meet, the good along with all the evil in the world ... and still love all the deep down good you glimpse by your new sight?

Yeah ...?

Well then, go your way, seeing as if for the very first time ... glimpsing the Face of Love bending near you, loving you ... to sight.

Amen.

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<sup>11</sup>. Resources used: “Wanting, but not wanting the blessing,” in *The collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock; Pastrix*, by Nadia Bolz-Weber; “The courage to see,” in Barbara Brown Taylor’s *Mixed Blessings*; James Kay’s *Seasons of Grace: Reflections from the Christian Year; John*, by Gerard Sloyan (Interpretation Series) *Synthesis Commentary* for March 30, 2014; *Lectionary Homiletics* for February/March 2014..