



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Openness

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 26, 2017,
The Fourth Sunday in Lent. Based on John 9:1-13, 28-38*

A man blind from birth. Miraculously healed, given sight by Jesus. Even in the shortened version we just heard, it's a multi-faceted story.

When they encounter this man blind from birth, Jesus' disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The two prevailing views in Jesus' day seem to be that a birth defect was either the result of a parent's or grandparent's sin, or the result of sins committed in the womb by the child. (I must admit, I have not been able to get my head around that.) But this was the common understanding of that time, traceable back to scriptures the disciples would have been brought up knowing. That is the common theological "view" that forms the basis for their question.

While this implied judgment may sound incredibly archaic or outrageous to us, we might look at our own culture ... We might remember that when the AIDS crisis began in our country in the mid-80's, there was severe judgment—and ostracism and demonization—of those who contracted the disease. We might remember how the term "welfare mother" was used, and the tone with which it was said. I can remember in my own lifetime when the c-word ("cancer") was never spoken aloud. We might remember a time, not so long ago, when people with mental health issues were completely stigmatized, shunned, hidden away.

Many of us would acknowledge that the actions of a parent or grandparent before a child's birth can affect the child after it is born, for good or ill. But Jesus challenges the common perception of sin: Neither this man nor his parents sinned.

One note about how the Gospel writer John uses the word "sin." John does not understand sin primarily as the presence of illness or violation of the law. John understands sin as resisting Jesus. It may help to remember that John's community were Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as the son of God. At the time John was writing, his community was in conflict with and separating from the other Jewish communities who did not believe the same thing. For John, the language of sight and blindness, of light and darkness, has to do with openness to the revelation of God in Jesus. Openness.

This man, blind from birth. This man intrigues me. He's minding his own business, begging, the only life and occupation available to a blind person. He doesn't ask to be healed. Suddenly his eyes are being smeared with mud made from a stranger's—Jesus'—saliva, and this stranger tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. Saliva was thought to have medicinal properties. But still, I think I'd be in a hurry to wash that off, too.

The man went and washed and came back able to see. We might expect great rejoicing and celebrating. But no. Somehow this man is so changed that his neighbors and the townspeople can't quite recognize him.

The crowd brings the man to the Pharisees, who question him over and over. The details of that questioning weren't included in our reading today. Suffice it to say, it made me think of a suspect being questioned at the table in the interrogation room on NCIS.

You may remember that the Pharisees and scribes were a particular group within Judaism of the time who were concerned with keeping strict religious laws and religious purity. Our Bible Study group this week pictured the Pharisees as the ecclesiastical hall monitors. We all can be Pharisees in our own ways, can't we? I have a clergy friend who works out a lot. He's in great shape and keeps a strict diet. He tends to frown at people who don't. My friend recognizes himself as a fitness Pharisee.

Some of the Pharisees are outraged that Jesus has violated the law by healing this man on the Sabbath. Others of the Pharisees don't believe it was really Jesus who healed the man. They all get furious with this formerly blind man, who, astonishingly, keeps standing up for himself against these authority figures. They drive him out.

Then, another astonishing thing: Jesus heard they had driven him out. Jesus goes looking for him. Jesus actually goes to find the man.

What is this man's life like, now that he can see after a lifetime without sight? We might imagine, or hope, that he has rejoined his family and community. Maybe he's gotten a haircut, a new suit, now has a good job. Maybe he's engaged.

The renowned neurologist Oliver Sacks tells the story of Virgil, a man blind since early childhood—much like the man in our Gospel reading. Virgil had created a satisfying life for himself, supporting himself with meaningful work. Then, at age 50, after having lived blind for over 40 years, Virgil underwent an operation that restored his sight. [*]

Again, we might expect euphoria and instant celebration. There was some of that. But what happened was more complex. While Virgil could see objects, people, landscapes, he could not make sense of what he was seeing. His brain had brilliantly wired itself to navigate the world by touch and sound, but the visual processing part of his brain had not developed. He could not judge distance. Whether a bird was close or a mountain was far away had no meaning for him. Virgil knew his dog and cat instantly by touch. Both dog and cat happened to be black and white. When Virgil saw them, he could not tell them apart. The "pictures" of them stored in his brain from touch did not match what he was seeing with his eyes. Everything and everyone looked different from different angles, so it was hard for Virgil to recognize anyone or anything. We all look very different from the front vs. the back vs. the side. The brains of sighted babies and children learn and absorb all this effortlessly; for the brain of an adult who's never seen, it's much harder.

Virgil's is a fascinating story, but not exactly with a happy ending. Virgil found life as a newly sighted adult incredibly difficult.

God's work of healing was revealed in the man blind from birth.

How is God's work being revealed in each of our lives? How might God be calling this community of St. Bart's into new life? How might God be bringing light into the dark places of this world?

Things can get in our way of perceiving what God is doing in us and around us. We may be blinded by busy-ness, even the busy-ness of doing good works. Sorry, can't talk with you, got to finish my sermon. We look past each other and talk past each other. Especially in this beloved city of New York, we rush past each other. We rush without noticing the daffodils blooming and the tulips pushing up on Park Avenue.

Assumptions and judgments make effective blinders, too. When I assume I know your motives and judge you accordingly without first asking and listening, then I've closed off an opportunity for real listening and honest conversation. That might have felt uncomfortable and confusing at first—like learning to see as an adult—but it could have opened up new understanding, even new relationship.

In so many ways, we are incapable or unwilling to see. But even our own blindness can't stop God's life-giving, saving action.

God is always going about the business of healing and giving life. We may not notice. We may not see the final result in our lifetime. We can block God's action—temporarily—or we can choose to cooperate. God can work with even a little bit of openness. The blind man was open enough to go to the pool and wash, as Jesus instructed.

Whatever we do or don't do, God is continually at work being God, bringing healing and new life, usually in unexpected ways.

God's healing may result in physical cure, as it did with the blind man. Or God's healing may not involve physical cure, but rather growth in spiritual maturity and wholeness as we learn to live faithfully through illness and other challenges.

May our hearts be opened, as well as our eyes. In sickness and in health, in our living and in our dying, may God's works be revealed in our lives.

[*] *An Anthropologist On Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*, by Oliver Sacks, 1995.
Chapter 4: "To See and Not See"