

What's Judgment Got to Do with It?

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John 9:1-41

"I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." Was blind but now I see. We know the story of John Newton, slave trader who had a profound religious experience that led him to repent and change his ways. We know countless stories. Countless stories about views changed, behaviors redirected, practices transformed. I presume John Newton had this morning's gospel reading in mind, which we have heard at great length and with some creativity of delivery. We understand, therefore, that sight is physical sight, and so much more. Just as thirst is physical thirst, and so much more; hunger so much more than physical hunger, death, even, so much more than physical death.

So much is going on here. Jesus "sees" the man born blind; that's an early indication that something is different. Presumably, both society and the religious community had not seen him; he has been ignored and ostracized, deemed expendable by his condition. His disciples discuss his condition, and Jesus teaches them that his blindness is not to be blamed on anyone, but is, rather, an opportunity. I am not sure how that understanding fits for anyone suffering from any condition. Jesus refers to himself as the light of the world, another visual symbol, and then proceeds to heal the man. That's one point – or a point and a sub-point: Jesus first of all pays attention to those generally ignored, and then he heals them.

Point two follows. The crowd of neighbors watches all of this. They are amazed. They ask question after question from sheer curiosity. Their skepticism leads them to lead the man to the Pharisees, a kind of religious tribunal. Unlike the curious neighbors, the Pharisees are downright hostile. Their authority is under attack. Yet before them was a man whose sight had been restored. They haul his parents in for testimony that fails. Frustrated, they blame the victim and kick him out of the proceedings. We can already tell how this will turn out. Jesus hears about all of this. He has to be bemused, but he also has to know that the portents for the future are not good. That's the second point, the continuing disbelief of the established religious authority figures. In Lent, we know where this is headed, but I can't help but think of contemporary moments when religious leadership has refused to see and has therefore been hampered by fear and a need for control. Jesus finds the man and they have an exchange.

That's the final point, when the man says "I believe." He believes. His parents believe. His neighbors believe. Religious leadership *doesn't* believe.

Robert Hoch writes that "While it may be implied, the blind man had not 'seen' Jesus until the end of this chapter, suggesting that Jesus doubles the meaning of the verb, 'to see' in this text, recalling both physical sight and inward illumination." Physical sight and inward illumination.

It is that doubling of the meaning of the verb that interests me most. To what are we blind? Where is sight needed for us the most. We focus in this story on the actual healing, but at heart I believe its point to be a struggle between the physically blind man who sees Jesus and the spiritually blind people who do not see him for who he is, if at all. To what hurtful behavior are we blind, hurtful to ourselves or others? To what belief or practice are we blind? Or, is there something you believe in your heart but have been handicapped by inertia to do anything? Is your blindness lack of action?

Poet Christian Wiman was diagnosed with a rare and serious cancer. His treatments were brutal, including a very difficult bone marrow transplant. Wiman writes: "Despite all that I have gone through, and despite all that I now face, I am still struck by the singular nature of the pain in the weeks after my diagnosis. It was not simply the fact itself searing through all the circumstances of my life, nor was it, as many people might suspect, the full impact of meaninglessness, the arbitrary nature of our existence, the utter illusion of God. No, it was an excess of meaning for which I had no context. It was the world burning to be itself beyond my ruined eyes. It was God straining through matter to make me see, and to grant me the grace of simple praise." (Page 156)

God straining through matter to make me see. God straining through...whatever...to make us see. God straining through religious rules and regulations to make us see. God straining through whatever it is that hinders us, or hurts us, or causes us to hinder or hurt another, to make us see.

"Open my eyes, that I may see/ Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me." That's an old hymn. What are those things to which our eyes need to be open, and how can we, as we journey through Lent, as we do the challenging and liberating work of looking deep inside and looking with new eyes at the world around us, how can we see?

The first step has already happened – we have been seen by Jesus. The next step is up to us. Having been seen, how, now, do we seek to see? May our eyes be opened. And may we know the grace, the amazing grace, of simple praise. Let's sing: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." Amen.

