

The Man Born Blind. John 9: 1-41. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods 3/3014 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

I suppose if Lent is all about us being miserable sinners as the result of Original Sin – if we swallow Augustine of Hippo's riff that we're steeped in sin and predestined (mostly) to remain there – then a conversation about original sin is the right thing to have in mid-Lent!

And the question that's the basis for this whole passage – the one, central question asked by Jesus' disciples – is exactly what's needed to start that conversation. Remember it? That question – accepted by everyone present except the man born blind and Jesus – “everyone” being the disciples, both groups of Pharisees, and the crowd – assumes that the cause of his blindness was sin. Remember the question? “Who sinned, this man or his parents?”

Not only is it “all about sin” from the perspective of those groups, the man born blind isn't in any way of interest to them. Nor is the fact of his blindness, which they take for granted. The only thing they care about is its origin, its cause.

And they don't even consider the possibility that there might be some other cause: sin is it. What I find really disappointing in our day and age is that there are still some people today who claim the name “Christian” who think that way, who believe that the Oso mudslide is clearly a result of God's judgment on human sinfulness and are, no doubt, wondering if it was the sin of those who died, or of their parents. Or that the death of Loretta Martin's brother Bill Strothman in the KOMO 4 news helicopter crash was the result of sin, and are wondering if it was Bill – a saint of a man, I learned yesterday at his funeral – or his parents who were the sinners.

Not only is this a cruel warping of divine compassion it also completely fails to help us navigate the meaning of human suffering for us, or nor helps us understand our God accurately as a God of compassion who mourns when we mourn, who bleeds when we bleed, and – at least once – has done so for our sake. The God that I know doesn't demonstrably make suffering necessary. Suffering isn't an example of God's judgment, nor is it some sort of cruel enforcement tool for making creatures obey the will of the Creator.

Frederick Niedner wrote a beautiful reflection on this text in the Christian Century that I came across when I was reading last week. He says this: “The Pharisees in [this] story, like the Pharisee in each of us, prove stubbornly blind to the reckless dispensing of mercy that takes place. It has come on the wrong day, to an unworthy recipient, from a maverick agent whom the Pharisees can't see for dust” (February 26, 2008). Institutional religion has a habit of gravitating toward structure and limits, perhaps because of the power of mystery and our anxiety and eagerness to control it. “A reckless dispensing of mercy” plays havoc with our need for order, for “decent” behavior. It also goes against our subconscious conviction that in some way, we deserve what we get, and thus those beggars on the street did something to get themselves into such a situation. Apparently the judging goes on today even in us.

John's gospel doesn't think that God requires suffering as both a punishment and a corrective. John writes instead about a God who sent his Son Jesus into the very midst of human existence in all it's richness and pain, and, in so doing, has made the Divine knowable through Christ's

love. We know God through sacrificial love, not through dispassionate judgment.

The truth, people of faith are coming to realize, is the opposite of the 1st Century's assumptions about human sinfulness, the opposite of Augustine's proclamation of Original Sin. And we are realizing this with a closer understanding of what John tells us about Jesus: that he challenges such notions, such stagnant fatalistic views of human suffering, and he does so with unlikely and improbable gifts; gifts of insight that reveal God's abiding love. The last word on any human being should never be based on an assumption of sinfulness.

Those stagnant fatalistic views of human suffering – of Original Sin – are reflective of a breakdown of community. There is, here, an unwillingness to see the man born blind at anything but a superficial level – as blind and not as a human being. Even when confronted by his humanity – “I am the man” – all they can hear are their own doubts, their own circumscribed realities.

In the face of this unwillingness to see the man born blind as an individual, as a human being, as a member of their community, Jesus questions their ability to see. He clearly didn't mean that they were literally blind, like the man born blind. The great 17th Century English Presbyterian preacher Matthew Henry got that completely when he said this: “There are none so blind, as those that will not see”. He got that, I believe, from John's gospel. John says to us “there's more than one way to ‘see’”, and if that's true then we're faced with this question: “which is more important: physical sight or inward illumination?” From John's perspective the man's organic lack of vision was less damaging than the spiritual blindness of those around him. Really “seeing” is more than organic “seeing”. It's a metaphor for believing, for moving from a superficial way of understanding the object of our sight as just that: a physical object – from moving from that superficial way of seeing to a way that perceives the truth deep in the heart of all things.

If we're willing to ask the question that breaks this all open – “blind to what?” – then John wants to give us the answer. Blind to Jesus. Christ is the light that has come into the darkness of the world, the revelation of God, who dispels the darkness of human existence. Wait, not just that Christ is the light of the world who dispels the darkness of human existence, but Christ is the light of the world who can, who will, dispel the darkness of *your* human existence.

That's the way to true community, John's Jesus says to us. And how does that true community come into being? I believe John was quite intentional in his description of how the man born blind came to see, a description which, if we stop to think about it, is about us as much as the man born blind: buried and reshaped in the mud of the new creation, washed in the water of the sent One, given a gift of sight as never before, such that, if we take the gift seriously we will be transformed. This is the language of baptism.

Why believe in Jesus? Because the gift of second sight, the gift of community through water, the gift that frees us from talk of some original stain that mires us in a sticky and corrosive pool of sin, the gift of God – Jesus – for the people of God – us – which is ours through baptism....this gift is utterly transformative for our lives, ourselves, and each other. May that gift be yours.