

Sermon – Lent 4 – Cathedral of the Incarnation

John 9:1-41

I often wonder if Jesus became exhausted arguing with the Pharisees and trying to convince his disciples of his destiny in life. The chapter preceeding today's long gospel passage tells us that Jesus had been in the temple arguing with the Jews about sin, Abraham and God. The argument is so tempestuous that the Jews want to stone Jesus but he escapes.

As Jesus and the disciples fled the temple we pick up the story as they are walking along the road where they see a blind man, most likely begging on the outskirts of the town. The inquisitive disciples ask Jesus to confirm whether it was the sin of the man or the sin of his parents that made him blind. The answer opens up the rest of the passage.

In their question the disciples are looking to have their beliefs validated by identifying the one to blame for the poor man's disability. And they would be right in thinking that because God is recorded in Exodus as saying that a man's sin will be visited on his children for generations. But this is countered in Ezekiel when God is recorded as saying that why should a son, if he has followed the laws, pay for the sins of his father. The wicked shall pay for their own sins. So it seems the disciples question is legitimate.

The blind man's disability has the effect of excluding him from society. Roman Catholic theologian James Allison notes that "the defect excludes; that which excludes for the group also excludes from the way in which the group makes itself good; whence it is deduced that that which excludes has a serious moral cause."¹ In other words the community of the righteous good set the rules for inclusion and exclusion and sin is the moral cause for exclusion.

Jesus then sets out to counter this way of thinking as many of his actions and teachings do. Rather than confirm exclusion for the man Jesus works at inclusion, first by denying the logic of the disciples, and the prevailing culture, and then physically healing the man with a poultice of mud for his eyes and a wash in the pool of Siloam. When the man is made whole as creation intended, he is able to be restored to wholeness within his community.

Up to this point the blind man has been silent, not named and just one of the many disabled people that found themselves as the scenery for the life of the righteous. The man, likely a beggar, discarded to the fringes but now seen by Jesus and the disciples.

After he is healed the man comes into clearer focus both within the community and for us. Jesus recedes physically from the scene but becomes the object of the next phase of the story as the community and the man slowly acknowledge what has happened and through whom it was done.

The community doesn't seem convinced by what is the man's explanation so they take him to the Pharisees at the temple where he explains what has transpired. The Pharisees try to make sense of what appears as a miracle. "Could a man of God do this?" they asked. Some say that no man of God would heal on the Sabbath denying Jesus is of God. Others argue that he must be a man of God because he has restored sight to the man. Rather than resolve

¹ James Allison *Faith Beyond Resentment* p3-26

the issue amongst themselves the Pharisees ask the man who he thinks the healer is. “A prophet” he says. This explanation is still antithetical to the righteous Pharisees.

The Pharisees then seek to discredit the man. First they doubt his whole story, even that he was born blind. Then they seek proof and call in his parents for some questioning. Fear overcomes his parents because they were at risk of being cast out of the temple too for being sinners. Full of fear, and not wanting to be victimized, they provide the minimal explanation and rather than stay the object of the Pharisee’s questioning they substitute their son and put him into a position that they feared themselves. How many times do we do that?

As the story unfolds the formally blind beggar gains confidence and faith that what he is proclaiming is true. The Pharisees though still seek to deny the man his truth by refusing to accept that Jesus is a man from God. They continue to call Jesus a sinner because he healed on the Sabbath. The man however gives a rational argument for the hypocrisy and the existence of Jesus as a person of God. The evidence is clear to him. As is often the case the powerful refuse to accept this argument and instead feel threatened so drive him out of the temple.

The man finds himself excluded yet again. When he was a beggar, his exclusion from society presented no threat to the establishment and they had no problem with him. When he was healed and capable of being included into society for the first time the community and Pharisees are at first curious but then reject him and deny his explanation.

The only way he could have remained included was if he denied Jesus was of God. His truth resulted in his exclusion. He could have simply agreed that Jesus was a sinner for healing on the Sabbath and he would have been in the group rather than being the subject of their ire. He could have felt welcomed rather than scorned but he would have had to deny Jesus, the man who healed him. That was something he wasn’t prepared to do. The previously divided group of Pharisees came together to mock the man. He is perceived as a threat to them, a sinner, so he has to be excluded.

You might see a parallel here with Jesus’ own story and his ultimate exclusion from the seemingly righteous community. The betrayal of Jesus by Judas and the denial by Peter of knowing Jesus all stem from a fear of exclusion and being cut off and isolated.

The community who think they are good and righteous will soon be confronted with their own sin. The previously blind man grows in his faith and sense of justice by standing by his conviction in the face of ridicule and expulsion. The Pharisees also grow in their ability to coalesce around scapegoating and the mechanism of exclusion.

The beggar born blind comes to see more than the physical world. He comes to see how the world operates and the blindness is lifted from him. He sees the true messiah and hungers for salvation. The Pharisees though reveal their own blindness by holding on to those aspects of their community and religion that they feel have to be defended. Their blindness causes their sin by their inability to see Jesus as the righteous Son of God.

James Allison says “sin is the resistance in a person of God, to the creative work of God which seeks to include us all.” Sin then ceases to be a defect that excludes someone from a community. Sin becomes the actions of the righteous that seek to exclude.

Jesus tells the man that he came into the world so that the blind may see and those that think they see become blind. Those that could be called the righteous good can be blind to their own goodness, for in their efforts to be righteous they exclude.

Lent is our time for reflection on our own lives. Today the gospel prods us to reflect on our own blindness that we might be completely unaware of. Jesus calls us to see our blindness and to avoid participating in the exclusion of others by our fear of being excluded ourselves.