

Lent 4, Year A
John 9:1-41
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Bill Ellis

In today's Gospel lesson St. John has composed a story rooted in the metaphor of blindness and sight, but with a twist. The religious experts who should be able to see the presence of God in Jesus are blind to him, while the person with no learning whatsoever - a person blind from birth as a matter of fact - is able to see that very presence in Jesus. What makes this story so important is the cause of this blindness, for it turns out that the very thing that should give people a clear vision of God's power is precisely what blinds them, and if we dare to consider it for even a moment we will discover that what blinded them then can, and does, also blind us today. But that is why this story is valuable, for it helps us understand ourselves and so casts the kind of light that just might in the end enable each of us to see a little bit better.

The Pharisees had both the Law and the Prophets. They had studied God's word as revealed in these sacred writings over a long period of time and had also developed a body of commentary that shed even further light on the scriptures. As a result of all this they knew how God worked, and were therefore confident that they could tell what was of God and what wasn't. So when Jesus came along and healed this man on the Sabbath, and moreover did it with the application of some sort of mud poultice many of them knew for sure

that he couldn't possibly be of God because he had violated the Sabbath. This guy isn't just messing around with dietary and clothing laws, he is breaking the Ten Commandments. So upon further investigation the rift among the Pharisees over whether Jesus could be of God or not is healed, and it is with one voice that they confront the now sighted man and declare "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

Had John written this story from the point of view of the Pharisees that would be the end of it, and we would have an account of a brave group of defenders of the true faith putting down a radical assault on God's righteous will. But John didn't tell the story from that perspective, as we know, he told it from the perspective of the blind man, and Jesus. So we know that those Pharisees were wrong in their assessment, they were blind to the very presence and power of the God they claimed to worship. But look at what blinded them, for that is what is so crucial about this passage. They were blinded by their certainties about the Bible and the rightness and faithfulness of their own interpretation of it. They were blinded, most simply put, not *by* their tradition, but *by their own conviction* that they understood that tradition in its deepest, purest sense. That source of blindness is still with us today. Let me give you two examples that are bound to be at least a bit inflammatory.

How is it that we know that the ordination to the Episcopate of Gene Robinson some five years ago was a terrible thing that violated God's will? We know it was a terrible thing because we have a tradition, we have the Bible and

we understand that Bible and so can truly and fully discern the mind of God. That ordination does not fit within that tradition and therefore it must be wrong, and can't possibly be of God. So a few years ago now a group of people from this Cathedral and St. Stephens left their churches and formed another because they knew for sure that we had departed from the true faith. They just knew what God looks like, and God doesn't look like a gay bishop. And on the other side of that same coin, how is it that others know that those biblical literalists can't be of God, can't have the true light of Christ shining in them? The answer is equally simple; it is because they know how to interpret scripture, they know the mind of God, and what these literalists say can't be reflective of the presence of God because they just don't understand what the Bible is really saying.

Can't we see that when people of either the right or the left adopt that kind of attitude toward our common tradition they are not identifying with Jesus or the blind man in this story, they are identifying squarely with the Pharisees? Can't we see that? Can't we see that to take this attitude towards our tradition means inevitably that we end up identifying with the group that is so certain it understands the mind of God that it is willing to declare that anything that doesn't fit within the tradition as they interpret it can't possibly be of God? This story makes it so clear that when we become so fixed not just in our tradition, but in our own interpretation of that tradition that we become willing to judge and condemn others, we invite judgment on ourselves.

So, just as with the Pharisees in the story we all at one time or another, in one way or another, become blinded to the very presence of the God we claim to worship. “My word,” most of us say, “God can’t possibly work through a Mormon; Joseph Smith was a nut case.” Well, Joseph Smith was in fact a nut case, but do we understand the mind of God so perfectly that we can declare for all time that the power of God can never be shown through the work of a Mormon?

I used to take advantage of my vacation time to visit conservative evangelical and even Pentecostal churches. Once I attended a Pentecostal church on a Sunday when they were giving communion. I didn’t take communion. I refused not because I wasn’t a member and didn’t think it right, for I often take communion when I visit Roman Catholic churches even though I know I am not supposed to. I didn’t take communion because I was quite convinced that it wasn’t “valid.” So there I was sitting in the midst of a gathering of people declaring to myself I won’t participate in this event because a bit of grape juice delivered to my pew in a shot glass can’t be of God. I was so completely wrapped up in my own understanding of the Christian tradition that I was perfectly willing to judge the experience of others, and thus to be blinded to the possibility that just here, right here, in that very bit of grape juice delivered in a shot glass I so disdained, just might have been for me at that moment, the life and presence of Christ.

That is a nice example of the very judgment Jesus describes when he says at the end of this passage “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Those of us who know our tradition well, who ought to be able see, become blinded from time to time by our very certitude, and in our willingness to judge others miss the presence of Christ and so bring judgment on ourselves.

And that is why this passage is so valuable. It shows us to ourselves, and demonstrates as few passages do just whose side we are really on when we presume to condemn others as being totally faithless, without God, simply because what they do doesn't fit into our interpretation of the tradition we share. This story invites us not to abandon our tradition, not at all, but rather to embrace it in a new way through the realization that we worship the God who is bigger than our interpretation of our tradition, and who wishes us to understand that this fact is itself part of our tradition.

For this is a story in the bible, and it is like many stories in the bible that make the same point, most notably perhaps the book of Job. That means quite simply that within our own tradition is this remarkable revelation that God does and will come to us in ways that don't fit the tradition as we understand it, that don't accord with anything we know or take comfort in. It declares to us further than when we insist we know we know the mind of God for all times and all places we are the ones violating an important aspect of our tradition, and our

judgment of others becomes the means by which we find ourselves under judgment.

I see today's passage as an invitation. It is not an invitation to give up my faith or my beliefs about my faith. But it is an invitation to give up my certitude, my conviction that I really do know what God is thinking. I am invited to give this up not because my opinions are wrong or make me a bad person, but because my certainty about my opinions blinds me a times. So I am being invited to give up that certainty in order that I might learn to see the presence of God in this world better than I can see that presence now, and so grow more fully into that life of Christ which is God's will for all of us. As Robert Hunter wrote, and Jerry Garcia sang, "Once in a while you get shown the light in the strangest of places if you look at it right."