

BLINDNESS AND SIGHT IN THE AGE OF PANDEMIC
By Lou Poulain, LLP

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

Before the sermon. Notes about scripture interpretation.

In the Spring of 1978 I took a graduate course in New Testament from Dr. Kevin Gordon at University of San Francisco. We were all assigned a book to have been read prior to the first class session. That book was “The Bible And Human Transformation” by the Rev. Dr. Walter Wink, a Lutheran pastor and theologian. I have been much influenced by that book, and in particular by something he wrote in the Introduction. Wink stated that the most fruitful path to understand the deep meaning of any scriptural text is to approach each character in the story as an aspect of your own inner life. This is a presumption I always try to take to the task of preaching.

Throughout the life of the church, the gospel of John, and this section in particular, have been frequently subject to a different kind of interpretation that led to, or reinforced anti-semitism. At the time that the gospel according to John was composed, there were deep tensions and even antagonisms between Jews, who were wrestling with their identity after the fall of the Temple, and Christians, who claimed a new revelation that many, or most Jews saw as antithetical to Judaism. That polemic appears in John’s gospel.

Just a reminder: Jesus was raised in the Pharisaic tradition. When “The Pharisees” becomes a label for those who opposed Jesus, it is reflective of later issues.

I will approach the text as written. I do this bearing in mind this gospel reflects an inner spiritual dimension.

This is an interesting time to confront John's story of the man born blind. I can't help but wonder how our experience of the beginnings of this pandemic affects our understanding of the story, and how the gospel message might inform our response to this current medical emergency.

This is a time of shared anxiety because of what we, ourselves *cannot* see or know with certainty. Those of us who are self-isolating, practicing "social distancing," avoiding physical contact with others, washing our hands and using wipes and hand sanitizers; we are doing our best to inoculate ourselves against a virus that has infected an unknown number of people in our community. So, if we venture out, it is with at least a small edge of fear. Sadly, some people have reverted to one of the most common strategies for combatting unknown threats; scapegoating. Chinese and other asian restaurants were among the first "victims" of this pandemic, and for a while, even a Mexican beer named "Corona" suffered a drop in sales. Sadly, and more seriously, a few have let their fears and panic overwhelm their good judgment, and around the country asian men, women and children have suffered verbal abuse, and even physical assaults right on the streets of our cities.

Human nature. The problem is, we tend to be *absolutely blind* to the deep-seated patterns that dictate *why* we are the way we are.

This gospel story is, on the surface, about blindness and sight. But by the time we get to the end, we discover it is also about spiritual blindness, self-righteousness, judgment, exclusion and sin. John the gospel writer clues us in right from the first sentence:

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Wow! The disciples were absolutely ready to judge the man's sins! The common understanding in the time was that physical deformities and sensory deficits were caused by sin, by the disfavor of God. They would have known that this man, blind from birth, was excluded from the temple because of a defect that must have been somebody's fault. Their question exposes how deeply they, the disciples themselves were enmeshed in that way of thinking.

But Jesus is very quick to put a stop to that:

Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

It’s interesting how the healing positioned the man in relation to his neighbors. He had always been this anonymous unfortunate being to whom no attention was paid whatsoever. So much so, that his neighbors had become *blind to him* — didn’t even see him any more. When he came back from the pool with sight given, he appeared in an unexpected context, and they were quite confused; not sure he was actually the man born blind. His insistence that it was he created even more confusion. They kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?”

Now we come to the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees. Because the blindness of the now once-blind man made him ritually unclean, his healing affected his temple status. For the Pharisees, the man’s healing challenged them in two ways. First, this healing was, as the man himself said, unprecedented. He said, “Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind!” And, the healing was not the result of temple prayers sacrifices or priestly intercessions. So the Pharisees *couldn’t* see the possibility that God was doing something new, in a new way.

Secondly, the agent of healing was Jesus, a man they deemed to be, himself, an outsider. They said, “...but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from!” To make matters worse, the healing took place on the sabbath, clearly a sin from the Pharisees’ *justification by obedience to the law* viewpoint..

So. All kinds of blindness, everywhere. But not for the man who had been blind from birth. His vision was *not restored*, but it was truly a brand new thing. This was a new life. He could see — he could see Jesus.

And that new sight showed so brightly in contrast to the *epidemic* of blindness-es all about him.

If you remember Pastor Salying's sermon a couple of weeks ago, when we heard the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night, she made the point that for Nicodemus, coming to belief in Jesus was a process that took place over time. At the beginning of the gospel, he is confused and uncertain. By the end of the gospel he is willing to take great personal risks to help provide for Jesus burial.

The story under the story, about this once blind man coming not just to sightedness, but to spiritual sight, is also about a process.

When first questioned by the neighbors how it was he could see, he said, "A man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' When I went I received my sight."

"A man called Jesus."

When the man was brought before the Pharisees for interrogation, they challenged him that Jesus was "not from God, and he does not observe the sabbath. How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs? What do you say about him?" And the man said, "He is a prophet."

"He is a prophet."

In the second interrogation, the Pharisees were getting rough with the once-blind man. "Give glory to God! We know this man is a sinner." After some back and forth during which the man held his ground., he said, "You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ... If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

The Pharisees answered him, "*You* were born entirely in sins, and you are trying to teach us?"

The Pharisees steadfastly refused to entertain the notion that God, through Jesus, had healed this man, and instead resorted to insult and violence as they excluded the man from their company. They drove him out.

John, our gospel writer, has painted a portrait in colors of deep contrast. On one side is a persistent darkness, where the light is impenetrable *by*

choice. And on the other, the bright, vibrant, exciting lights of new vision, made possible by the willingness of this man to embrace sight.

This man, once blind, is now ready to really see Jesus.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found [the man], he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “YOU HAVE SEEN HIM, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.”

Lord, I believe.

This once-blind man has received the fullness of sight. He sees Jesus, and believes.

Remember the beginning of this story where the disciples queried Jesus about the sin that caused the blindness? Listen now to the *end* of the story:

Jesus said, I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

The sin that remains is their refusal to open their eyes to what stands directly in front of them. This sin results in the Pharisees’ casting this once blind man as an irredeemable outsider, and expelling him from the temple.

This is a good gospel reading for the second half of lent, as Jesus and his disciples, and we, turn our eyes toward Jerusalem. The sin of the Pharisees, their refusal to open their eyes, is the same sin, with the same result; it will bring about Jesus’ crucifixion.

It’s also a great gospel reading to fuel and inform our own introspection during this season of Lent (weirdly combined with a season of enforced self-isolation). Jesus healing touch, his forgiveness and inclusiveness toward the once-blind man was pure grace — without *price*. Is it possible that the Pharisee’s refusal to open their eyes, much less their hearts, to

Jesus was rooted in a great fear that the *cost* of God's grace for them was great, as they perceived it would require them to relinquish — let go — of ego and self-righteousness in order to make room for God's righteousness. I think this paradox is real. Grace is freely given, but by its nature, it calls for a response, which may carry a perceived cost.

I invite you to ponder this: God's grace is a call to let go of interior barriers and defenses. In a time of pandemic, that may be the act of acknowledging fear, so that we can let go of that fear in favor of trust.

Amen.