

## *“Becoming Blind”*

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4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent – April 3, 2011

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### *Reading: John 9.1-41*

As he 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?’ 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.’ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’ Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’ They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, ‘He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.’ Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’ His parents

answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, 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.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! 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. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, 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.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement 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.

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

Living in this individualistic age and fragmented society, we often speak highly of community. How much we need it, how we value it when we find it. No surprise that it is the first word of our Bloor Street United condensed mission statement: *A community, exploring faith, seeking justice and living with respect in creation.* We talk about how important it is for the church to cultivate and nurture community, both among the gathered and more broadly. Community offers a framework for safety, and for flourishing. Probably our most precious value in the United Church, whether we succeed in living by it or not, is inclusiveness. Be with us, we say. At our best, our doors are open, our table is open – both at communion and at lunch – and we say with sincerity, you are welcome. We say, let us be together, for support, for growth – to learn those big lessons about love that Jesus taught. We want this to be true.

Community is part of what we value in the church in another way too – so often for people of integrity, people who are honest and good hearted, the doctrinal content of Christian faith has become problematic. Stories about inexplicable events – a storm stilled or water turned to wine, or miraculous healings, like the one we just heard – strain credibility. And some of the classic theological assertions are worse. Right now, in Lent: a God who sends a son to suffer in order to exact some sort of compensation for the offences of people? Can that be right? And we look around ourselves and see that neither sin nor suffering has in any way been reduced. For some people, perhaps many people, these theological difficulties really damage the basic trustworthiness of the faith. Judging from the letter to the editor in Observer, it doesn't seem that there is much uptake for the post-theism that we have heard recommended in some quarters. Even so, I think a lot of us ask ourselves from time to time, what am I doing here?

And yet when the question arises, why not just stay home on Sunday morning and listen to Michael Enright, we say, well there is something about the community. Something about working with people who share your values, something about the attempt to be together in the presence of what is mysterious and holy. It's about the community – I hear that all the time. I often *say* it, for that matter. It's a bit of a side-step, perhaps, around some of the challenges of contemporary faith questions – but I think there is a great truth to it too. That in the attempt to be together as followers of Jesus, no matter how difficult that may sometimes be, we are brought into the presence

of something whose meaning and goodness is much greater than ourselves.  
Something that holds us.

Odd then, to find that in today's story about Jesus, his theme is the downside of community. The story of the man born blind explores the ways in which community can be morally ambiguous. We watch while Jesus demonstrates time and again that a strong community can be a source of harm to its members. We know this is part of the polemic of the Gospel of John, but it isn't hard to relate it to the contemporary world. We can see the moral ambiguity of community when we look around us. Many have commented on the discipline and community solidarity that have made the response to earthquake and tsunami so impressive in Japan and New Zealand. But the downside is also obvious – the tight circle around Terry Jones as he burns a Koran, the response from Afghanistan, from within another community that asserts the priority of its values. Those are extreme examples, but a number of us here will have had experiences of community life that are mixed.

Today we listen to a story about a blind man sitting minding his own business. He belongs to the community – his parents are part of the synagogue there, people know him. His misfortune allows his neighbours to fulfill an obligation of almsgiving which is upheld within the community. He seems to be content with his lot – doesn't shout out to Jesus, isn't asking for anything beyond the chance to sit quietly, collecting the charity and goodwill of passersby. The chapter of him as a person – really just a theological problem – whose sin was it that accounts for this man's disability, they ask Jesus.

Timeless question of course, we still ask it. In a strange way it seems more comforting to think that all cancers are caused by pollution or diet or smoking, to explain even natural disasters as conforming to some master plan in which all suffering has some logic to it. Better than saying, we are at the mercy of an unfathomable universe. We'd rather be guilty than powerless.

But Jesus dismisses the questions – tells them to look at the man to see God's works revealed. Jesus himself doesn't do much – makes a bit of mud, for the man's eyes, using plain dirt and his own spit, and tells the man to go outside the walls of the

city to the pool of Siloam. Note that the man is healed when he leaves the community. Coming back restored and joyful, we now see him betrayed four more times. First his community members do not recognize him, apart for his disability. *Are you the one that sat there?* They ask. Had they never looked at him? Next, his religious leaders show that they had no compassion for his original affliction and are now entirely indifferent to his delight. All they care about is the breach of the Sabbath and the offense they take at the upstart Jesus. Third, the man's own parents decide not to give him any support. Go ask him, they say, when questioned, he is of age – and we are told that this chicken-hearted evasion arises because they are afraid of being ostracized from the community. Finally, the Pharisees again, who absolutely refuse to engage the man's good questions, but as we are told, drive him out.

By the very small mud-making gesture of attentiveness to an individual, Jesus has begun a chain reaction which exposes the cracks in the foundation of the community. It seems that the price of safety is rigidity, intimidation and fear. And not one of them thinks to rejoice with the man.

Toward the end of the story we have a little flash of their humanity, though, a tender glimpse of what might have been – some Pharisees say to Jesus, *We are not blind, are we?* And of course, just as the author intended, we the readers know the answer. Like hecklers at a pantomime, we want to shout, Oh, are you ever blind!

But it is a question we should ask too. Of course, the community we seek to build here is gentle. We are talking about having lunch together, not joining a cult! But. Do our commitments sometimes make us blind to possibilities? Are we blinkered by our attachment to the routines and norms of the church? Could it be that the very things we value most about our time together keep us from thinking more imaginatively about the future? Does the insight that we do have make us in some way un-insightful?

Over the last few months there has been some talk in the congregation about vision – about whether we have it, and whether we need it, and how we are going to get it. In some quarters there is impatience, in others perhaps a sense of déjà vu. I don't want to press this beyond what it can bear, but I think this story of the man born

blind suggests that, paradoxically, an element of vision is the ability to acknowledge blindness. It tells us to adopt a posture of openness to new sight.

In this long slow season of Lent, both as a community and in our own lives, we pause with our uncertainty. We concede the limitations of our understanding. By cultivating a kind of intentional blindness, we may find that we are invited into the healing presence of a knowledge greater than our knowledge, and a love greater than our love.

Let us pray,

*Loving God, be present in our community, and make us blind when blindness will lead us to you. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*