

Lent IV      April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011

I Samuel 16:1-13      Ps 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

In these readings from Scripture, we hear many different images of seeing and not seeing, sight and blindness, darkness and light. In the story of the anointing of David, the Israelites, even members of David's own family, did not *see* that he was the chosen one of God. How could this be? Jesse had seven sons who were older than David – how could God not pick one of them? David was a young boy who was out in the fields taking care of the sheep. He was the lowliest in the family by birth order and was doing the lowliest of jobs, yet God *saw* him not with human eyes, by human measurement, but with the divine eyes of love and discernment.

This same God, in the person of Jesus, was walking along one day when he came upon a man who was blind from birth. In all likelihood, he would have been a beggar, a nobody in the eyes of the world. The people asked Jesus a question: "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" They asked this question because in those days, if you were born with a so-called defect of any kind, people thought you were being punished for something your parents had done wrong. Or maybe you were being punished in advance for your own sins. Before we sit in judgment of that sort of thinking, we'd do well to remember that in our own culture, within our living memory, it used to be the custom that families would hide their 'defective' children. I can remember a friend of my mother's who had a daughter who was mentally challenged. She was almost never allowed out of the house unless she had to go to a doctor's appointment or something. It was as if the family was ashamed of her. My husband and I sponsor two children in India who are served by an organization that provides for the education of children with various disabilities. In this part of India, even if the parents are the ones with the disability, the children can't be part of the public education system. The organization really supports whole families who would otherwise be kept away from access to normal services. I'm not sure so much has changed in the world's thinking since the time of Christ.

Anyway, Jesus – the light-bearer, the healer, the lover of souls – restores the sight of the man born blind. Then the religious authorities get on his case because Jesus healed the man on the sabbath. They cried out to the crowd: "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." Talk about being blind! Yet when the man himself testifies to the healing accomplished by Jesus, he says, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." To which the religious authorities responded, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" There it is – the idea of what has come to be called "original sin" right there in the thinking of our spiritual ancestors.

There is an exquisite poem written by priest, theologian, preacher, and poet John Donne in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that speaks eloquently about the problem of sin: how we see it, how God sees it, and how we are healed from it by Christ.

Wilt thou forgive that sin, where I begun,  
    which is my sin, though it were done before?  
Wilt thou forgive those sins through which I run,  
    And do run still, though still I do deplore?  
When thou hast done, thou hast not done, for I have more.

Donne writes eloquently about the state of sin that permeates the world into which we are born and from which no human being can possibly escape on his or her own, so pervasive is the brokenness of humanity. Then he adds to this his own sins, the things he has done and continues to do, even though he knows they're wrong. If God forgives him all of this, God still has more to forgive.

Wilt thou forgive that sin, by which I won others to sin,  
And made my sin their door?  
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun a year or two,  
But wallowed in a score?  
When thou hast done, thou hast not done, for I have more.

He then goes on to lament the sins he committed that led others to sin, and the sins which he was able to avoid for a year or two, after having been mired in them for decades. If God forgives him all of this, God still has more to forgive.

I have a sin of fear that when I've spun my last thread,  
I shall perish on the shore;  
Swear by thyself, that at my death they Son shall shine as he shines now,  
And heretofore.  
And having done that, thou hast done, I fear no more.<sup>1</sup>

Donne expresses his fear of death. Promise, he pleads to God, promise that at that moment of passage from this shore to the next, the Light of Christ will be there and will never cease to be forever after. His plea is to be given eyes to see the face of God. With that assurance, God can rest, for the sinner need not fear anything anymore.

At the end of this morning's Gospel, the religious authorities perhaps begin to see the light, for they have the courage and humility to ask Jesus, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" But of course, they were blind – they were more concerned with the letter of the Law than with healing. They were more concerned with who was bad than with how to agents of The Good.

It is for freedom that Christ sets us free. It is to have the capacity to see the face of God that we are given our sight. It is to take us out of darkness into light that we are filled with the Spirit of Christ.

May the Light of Christ heal all our blindness and help us to see ourselves and others with the loving eyes of God.  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Hymn #141 *Hymnal 1982* Church Publishing