

Seeing in the Dark

This extended passage from John's gospel is again concerned with Jesus' identity, who recognizes it and who does not. Jesus is only present at the beginning and at the very end of this narrative which is like a play done in seven acts beginning with Jesus' and his disciples noticing a blind man. This causes the disciples to pose this question: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that this man was born blind?" Jesus' response is "neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." This is often viewed as the blindness was caused by God so the healing would reveal Jesus' identity. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* proposes that the Greek text actually make that causative connection of Jesus' healing and the man's blindness. The statement neither the man nor his parent's sinned stands alone so guilt about sin is not an issue addressed here; the cause of the man's blindness is not addressed, it is just stated that he was born blind. This leads to a challenge about the nature of sinfulness and its cause. This issue is raised several times but not in relation to the state of physical blindness which begins the narrative but the one of spiritual blindness displayed by the friends, neighbors and Pharisees within the narrative. The presence of the blind man gives Jesus an opportunity to further establish his identity by showing God's power and desire to heal. Jesus takes this opportunity to also make an oblique reference to his coming betrayal, suffering and death with the loss of light in the world which will occur then. "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is still day; night is coming when not one can work. (4)" Jesus tells his audience as long as he was in the world he was the light of the world on a mission sent by God. His appears to be a reference to the approaching time he will no longer be in the world with them and coming darkness. This recipient of Jesus' healing differs from many whom Jesus has healed. He did not seek out Jesus or request to be healed. Jesus' response to the question seems to include offering healing to the blind man. Jesus begins the healing through using his saliva to make a mud pack which he places on the man's eyes. He then sends the man to go to Jerusalem's pool of Siloam and wash there. This ends Jesus' interaction with this man for the time being. The man does not speak to Jesus but evidently he listens to Jesus' words and goes and does what Jesus has instructed. He goes to the pool of Siloam and washes off the mud and when he comes back he is able to see. Becoming sighted is not the end of this story by a long shot. He is known by his community as a blind man who begged for his living. When he returns from the pool of Siloam with sight he becomes the focus of local gossip. His friends and neighbors, those who knew him as a beggar, do not rejoice with him. Instead they begin to ask what turns out to be the beginning of asking him wrong questions. They question his identity and how this has occurred. They ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" to which some reply it isn't him but someone who looks like him. They are concerned only about the how and not the who of his restored sight. They do not seek to be enlightened about the source of his healing. He affirms his identity as the formerly blind beggar and relates to those questioning him the interaction he has had with "the man called Jesus." When asked where that man has gone, he replies he does not know. Jesus has not remained in the immediate area. His answers do not satisfy those who questioned him so he is taken before the Pharisees. The Pharisees then begin their questioning about how he has become sighted. His response is to repeat the events of his interaction with Jesus. The passage now moves to a back and forth questioning about the event and Jesus' identity. The concept of sinfulness is again introduced into the narrative because Jesus has done this on a

Sabbath. Their conclusion is both the healed man and Jesus who did the healing must be sinners because Sabbath law was violated. Two ideas are proposed: Jesus cannot be from God because he did not observe Sabbath according to Moses' instructions which had been received from God or because he was able to heal Jesus must have come from God. This difference of opinion causes them to re-question this healed man about Jesus. During this second set of questions, he declares that Jesus is a prophet. Some then declare that he must not have ever actually been blind and sought proof of this thru testimony from his parents. When the parents are asked if he is indeed their son who was born blind, they affirm this truth. They also say they know nothing about how he has become sighted, referring those questioning them to seek answers from their adult son for he can speak for himself. At this point the back and forth begins to have a comic flavor as the now healed man is asked the same questions again and gives the same narration of what happened. After telling his story again, he complains that they do not listen....so why do they need to ask again as he can only tell them the same thing. He shortens his testimony to being "I was blind and now I see." Those questioning him have become frozen in their opinions and understanding; they cannot see how God could be at work in a different manner; they cannot see where this healing comes from and cannot trust in Jesus because they do not understand the source; they do not see where Jesus comes from. The authorities are offended that he refuses to change his testimony and challenges their refusal to accept what it means that Jesus could do this. This text is multilayered. It has a focus on both physical and spiritual blindness, on the importance of seeing rightly. Yet the first interaction described is one based on that "blind" man's listening to what Jesus say to him. He hears and in hearing, he acts. Because "correct" hearing does not happen, the number of wrong questions grows. The focus is on the how and not on the presence of the power to heal, to grant sight, present among them. The question about the man's belief is not addressed until after he has been expelled from the synagogue by those who refused to see. His first reactions to encountering Jesus is to trust and act on what he is told to do that will profoundly change his life. The text reveals the importance of both seeing and hearing when it comes to belief. In the second exchange between Jesus and the man, Jesus has sought him out to pose a question to him. Jesus asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus receives this response: And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus response by identifying himself. Jesus has granted the man sight without first asking for belief, but when Jesus provides that identification, the man's response is not only affirmative, he worships Jesus. Although he did not request the healing, his first response to Jesus exhibits trust. That trust is automatic but the healing occurred before the man had expressed "belief." This man through his encounter with Jesus has moved from identifying his healer only as "the man called Jesus" to replying when asked again by the Pharisees that he is a prophet. When further pressed about who has healed him, he replies that he must have been sent by God. His testimony identifies him a disciple of Jesus and led to his expulsion from the synagogue. This reading is all about sight, but not just physical sight as here it is seen as a metaphor for believing. Words for blindness, sight, seeing and so forth crop up 24 times in this 41 verse story. But we need to be clear that "seeing" described here is not only a metaphor. The man was really physically blind, he could not see when the story began and that blindness defined his life. When he gains his sight within the text his life is literally, not metaphorically changed. His changed status is disruptive. His friends and neighbors do not recognize him, and in spite of his affirmations that he is indeed, well who

he is, he is not welcomed and not joy is expressed for the healing he has receive. This poses a question for us. How often do we define those around us in terms of shortcomings, disabilities, challenges or deficits we perceive? How often do we do that to ourselves to continue to define ourselves by past setback, disappointments or failures? Do we recognize when things have changed for the better or do we continue to define ourselves and others by problems rather than possibilities? Does this tendency prevent us from seeing and acting on changes, even positive ones? The community portrayed in this narrative continue to define the man by his blindness, refusing to accept the possibilities offered by this change, to see this man and accept his new identity. Throughout the entire text, he is referred to by that former condition as they cannot accept the new one and thus expel him from the community. These actions seem to be based on the fear his changed status represent that if they accept him they must accept his testimony. John's gospel continually presents us with this truth that when Jesus arrives in our midst, things change. Our first reaction is that this is good, as the reception of sight to the blind man was surely a good thing. That is our first reaction until we realize that change brings with it disruption. When Jesus comes to dwell among us we then begin to see many things differently; those around us, neighbors "both near and far" as ones whose lives are to be included and cared for by us. The rather plaintive question posed by some Pharisees at the end of this passage might well be one we need to ask: "Surely we are not blind, are we?" During Lent as we make our way toward the events of the week we call "Holy", we consider how Jesus' identity was shown, how he claimed and lived into that identity. As we look around us and see darkness prevailing in many places, the question we need to consider is concerning not physical darkness but spiritual darkness. When we see the world's darkness how do we understand or fail to see it and our part in it. "Surely we are not blind, are we?" In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.