

Community Context: Church of the Good Shepherd, Nashua, NH- 8, 9:45 & 11:15am Services

Liturgical Date/Readings: Fourth Sunday in Lent- Year A/John 9:1-41

Sources: Google/Wikipedia/WorkingPreacher.org /Textweek.org/Sufi Mystic Tale Broken Pot

Date: April 3, 2011

Homilist: The Rev. Alanna M. Van Antwerpen

Preparing this sermon prompted me to look up the term “blindness” on Google search. At the top of the list was Wikipedia’s definition which read “the condition of lacking visual perception due to physiological or neurological factors.” How remarkably different a definition from the one we hear from the disciples in our Gospel reading today?! When they encounter the Man Born Blind with Jesus, their question is “who sinned, him or his parents, that he was born blind?”

The disciples’ question is *actually* reasonable! It’s shaped by their experience of the religious and cultural thinking of the time. This question points to the ancient Hebrew understanding of why someone would be suffering blindness or any number of ailments. Yet, Jesus’ answer is absolutely remarkable, totally different! His answer introduces a whole new way of understanding sin, blindness and what it means to experience God’s healing power in the world. Jesus answers, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

During this season of Lent, as we prepare for Easter day, it is worth us pondering the disciple’s question and Jesus’ answer when thinking about our journey of faith. So often we can see our brokenness and that of the world as causes of sin. We get mired down in how something is flawed, imperfect or focus on what seems impossible.

There’s an old Sufi tale in the mystical tradition of Islam that addresses just that: A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on an end of a pole that he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master’s house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For two years this went on daily, with the water bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to his master’s house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream saying, "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you." "Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?" The pot said, "For these past two years, I have been able to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to the master’s house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts."

Similar to the broken pot, we too can lament our efforts due to our limitations or brokenness. Yet, Jesus clearly helps us to see that those things we suffer in this life are not a direct result of our sinfulness. Like the poor cracked pot, we can become ashamed of our imperfection, we can become miserable and compare ourselves to others in unhelpful ways.

It’s in these moments of our own blindness that Jesus comes to us. Like the Man Born Blind, Jesus comes to us unsolicited and offers healing. The Man Born Blind does not ask Jesus to heal him, yet, in his struggle with blindness he is receptive to someone being present to him, so he listens to Jesus. Maybe the blind man is open to Jesus because of his vulnerability, or

because of his low social class or because of knowing his own limitations.

Whatever the reason, the Man Born Blind in his seeming imperfection, becomes a model for us to be confident in the healing we experience in unexpected places. He is a model for us to take a chance, to listen to Jesus, to go wash in the pool of the Sent One. Yet even the Man Born Blind does not immediately see clearly after he is healed. It is when he is questioned about his healing, when he is asked by his neighbors, parents, and the religious authorities that he bears witness to his experience of Jesus' true identity. With each questioning of how he was healed, the Man Born Blind stays true to his story saying, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." And each time he understands a little more of Jesus' identity, first saying he was 'a man' then a prophet' then from God.

Like the disciples following Jesus or the religious authorities that question the blind man: How do we lack sight when it comes to God's life in the world? How do we want to contain God's healing grace? How do we see the poor, the untouchables as bringing their situation upon themselves? How do we try to place limitations on God? If we challenge ourselves to live into the witness of the Man Born Blind, instead of the blindness of the disciples or the religious authorities, we too might gain sight. We might gain sight about the flaws in ourselves or in those we are in relationship with. We might gain sight about who is acceptable in our families, our workplaces, our church. In our journey we must do what the Man Born Blind did. We must talk with our friends, come to church, question our faith, so we can get clearer about our witness of Christ's hope in ourselves and in the world.

Like the Man Born Blind we can live into the unexpected reality of Jesus meeting us in our lives, offering transformation. Jesus, like the water bearer in our Sufi story, meets us in our despair: The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again the Pot apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pots side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the master's table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not have been this beauty to grace the house."

This Lenten season, how is God's grace being revealed to you through that what seems broken, flawed or imperfect? In our Gospel, *the blind see* and those who can see are blind. When we meet Jesus on the road, he gives us sight beyond our wildest dreams but that gift is not the end of the story. It is up to us to take responsibility and ownership of the gift we've been given in order to transform the world. Each of us has our own unique flaws. *We are all cracked pots*. But if we will allow it, Jesus will use our flaws to grace God's table and transform the world.

In a few moments we will turn to our Eucharistic table. This Lent we've been using Rite I in the Book of Common Prayer and there is a certain beauty in these prayers. In the Eucharistic prayer along with the bread and wine of communion being blessed, we pray: "And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto thee.

Ultimately that is what the Man Born Blind becomes, a living vessel for God's spirit through his witness of healing and like him, each of us have this opportunity. We too come to this table to offer the most important thing we have to God, to offer our selves, our souls and bodies. With all of our cracks, let us remember that in God's great economy, nothing goes to waste.