
A Comedy of Blind Humanity

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Lent 4 – Year A

“As Jesus walked along, he saw he man blind from birth. ...Jesus 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.’ ...He went and washed and came back able to see. ...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.’ (John 9:1-41, abbreviated).

There was a man born blind.

On that point, most people were in agreement. He had become a part of the cultural scenery, so familiar that people didn’t even see him any more. As a beggar, he received food; but apparently he received little actual attention. All this changed on the day that Jesus walked by, even though no one else seemed able to see exactly what had happened to him.

This long passage is—I believe—one of the funniest stories in scripture, told in the entire ninth chapter of John. The public investigation of how this blind man became able to see sounds like an early story line for the Keystone Cops. It is both a comic story, and one with a valuable lesson about what it is to see.

Here is how it goes:

As Jesus walked by one day, he met a man born blind. Immediately, this man born blind became for the disciples an object lesson. They treated him, not as a person, but as an example, or a proof text, for their theology. “Rabbi,” they ask, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Notice how attention is so quickly diverted from the need at hand, which is the man himself, to a theological or philosophical argument. We do the same maneuver today. In the face of human need, some of us prefer to use that need to shore up our own belief system, or our own political agenda. We see a person in need, and then we don’t see them at all. Instead, we systematize; how can my belief system, or morality system, account for this phenomenon?

Of course, we have belief systems for good reasons. But if we can’t see the actual person standing right in front of us, then our belief system, and moral system, is useless – no matter what our persuasion is.

“Who caused this to happen? This man or his parents? Who is to blame here? Why is there blindness in the world? Why is there poverty, illness, or behavior which out and out does not match mine? Who is to blame, nature or nurture – this man or his parents?”

Jesus, as he so often does, answers with a third option, one that the questioners did not think of. “Neither this man sinned, nor his parents,” Jesus said. “This man is here, before us blind, so that the marvelous works of God can be shown.” For Jesus, blame is not the name of the game.

When Jesus sees someone in need, he does not use that person’s plight to develop a political or moral agenda. Jesus sees opportunity, a chance to recognize and do God’s work. God’s work is revealed, not in blaming, and not in a moral

statement, but in an act of mercy, in an act which pays close attention to the person in need.

Then Jesus performs the healing in about the funniest way you can think of. It is not a medical procedure that most physicians would imitate today! Jesus spits into the dirt, makes a little mud, and then smears it into the man's eyes! What is going on? The man is already blind, and Jesus seems to make sure that he can see even less! In short, Jesus makes a grimy mud of short-sighted human observation and rubs that mud directly into the affected area of human need, so that it can only be God who can bring clear sight out of the mess.

In fact, the way in which Jesus heals the man's blindness becomes the metaphor for the entire miracle. Jesus heals by muddying up things first. When things are the muddiest, even more muddy than they were before, Jesus might have just begun his healing.

Then, the man goes away to wash in the pool of Siloam, and he returns able to see. The miraculous deed is done. But the story is still young; the marvelous comedy of shallow human comprehension continues. In fact, it is a comedy of blind humanity! For no one seems able to comprehend this miracle; its effect lies completely outside their realm of interpretation and possibility.

Listen to them try to understand! The neighbors ask themselves, "Isn't this the man who used to sit outside and beg?" Isn't he part of the same old familiar scene? "Yes," some of the neighbors claim, "he is the man."

"No, he's not," others say. "He just looks like the same man." Finally someone has the sense to ask the man himself. Again, notice how the neighbors prefer, at first, to talk among themselves, to interpret the event first for themselves, without paying actual attention to the man himself.

When they do finally ask the man, he responds very simply, "Yep, I'm the man."

"Then how were your eyes opened?"

"A guy called Jesus made mud, rubbed it in my eye, told me to go wash in the pool, and I did. Now I can see."

"Well, where is he?" they ask.

"I don't know," the man replies. Throughout this story, the man born blind represents utter simplicity and elegant truth. He replies to every question honestly and directly. He refuses to speculate about political or theological agendas. He knows only what Jesus asked him to do. He has no idea where the guy called Jesus is right now.

So, then they take the poor man to see the Pharisees, that devout group of religious leaders who tended to have everything figured out. The man repeats his simple story. The Pharisees argue among themselves. How can a man heal on the Sabbath? He must not be from God at all. They are divided. Then—again—someone thinks to ask the healed man himself, "What do you think of him?" It is an afterthought, but the healed man is beginning to get the picture. He thinks, "This guy Jesus, who I do not even know, must be some kind of prophet." Jesus is projecting new life, the new word of God, into a crazy and divided human situation; that is what a prophet does.

But the Pharisees are still divided. They decide to get the testimony of the poor man's parents. Maybe the man was not born blind after all; let's get the parents to tell the truth. Well, the parents do tell the truth, again in its simplest and most elegant form.

"Yes," they say, "we know that this is our son. Yes, he was born blind. But as to how he can see now, we have no idea." Then the parents repeat the greatest truth of the story. "Ask him," they say, "he is of age." He can tell you the truth, if you pay attention to the person in need. The person in need can tell us the truth! In fact, that person can reveal God to us, but we have to ask that person, not speculate among ourselves.

The Pharisees go back to the man. "Give glory to God," they shout out. "The man Jesus is a sinner. How do you now see?"

And here, the healed man begins to grow bolder. He begins to see all the more clearly. "Whether he is a sinner or not, I do not know." All I know is that I once was blind, but now I see."

The discussion becomes more intense. "What did he do to you?" the Pharisees ask, "How did he open your eyes?"

“I have told you already!” the healed man responds. Then he delightfully taunts them. With still more boldness, he says, “I have told you already. Hey, do you want to hear it again so that you can become his disciples, too?”

There, the Pharisees become livid. “You are his disciple, not us. We are disciples of Moses. As for this man Jesus, we do not know where he comes from.”

“Why, that is an astonishing thing,” the healed man taunts. “A man heals my eyes, but you do not know where he comes from. If he weren’t from God, could he do such a thing?”

The Pharisees have had enough. They drive him out. It is gospel high comedy!

Finally, at the end of the story, Jesus finds the healed man again. Now comes the time for interpretation and reflection. The act of healing has occurred. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Jesus asks. “Who is he?” responds the healed man, just as honestly as he always has. “I who speak to you am he,” Jesus responds.

“Lord, I believe,” proclaims the healed man.

With that proclamation, the healing is indeed complete. The man born blind sees not only the world around him, with utter and complete honesty. The man born blind now also sees Jesus himself, the Lord of that world, who can bring clarity even out of the mud made from human spit.

Our scattered speculations, emerging as they do from a need to defend our own agendas, are only as clear as mud in the eyes of God. As long as we seek only to fit the acts of God into our human picture, we are blind, unable even to comprehend what God may have for us in the future.

At the end of the ninth chapter of John, some Pharisees begin to see. The evidence of that sight is their own questioning. They question whether they can see at all. They ask Jesus, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” That self-questioning, about whether they can see, is itself evidence that they are beginning to see. Jesus’s words are sharp and precise: “If you say ‘We see,’ then your sin remains.”

Be careful, then, whenever we say, “We see.” Our human speculation, as fun and provocative as it may be, can never comprehend the amazing power of God. We can never enclose the marvelous presence of God. God will muddy up our sight before God brings us light.

Jesus, the Lord, the Light of the World, does shine a new light in our lives. Jesus does that not by blaming, not by figuring out some philosophical justification of reality, but by focusing on human need. There are people around us whose needs are so familiar to us that we are blind to them. They were born blind, we say, and that is that. And both parties, both us, stay blind.

Jesus, however, refuses to walk right by the blind man, just as Jesus refuses to walk right by each one of us. Jesus wants to touch each one of us with sight. And every person—blind or seeing, Pharisee or disciple—is an opportunity for Jesus. Each of us is an opportunity for God to reveal light in utter and elegant simplicity. Yes, things might get muddy first. They might get confusing and might even get funny. But Jesus wants to touch us. Jesus will touch our eyes today; the Light of the World is walking by.

AMEN.