

Lent 4, Year A
March 2, 2008

RCL
1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

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Eddie was the extrovert in the community for the disabled in the assisted living unit. He always plunked himself down right in the middle of where the action was - in a chair by the mailboxes, at the entrance to the dining room, or right in front of the TV in the sitting room.

He knew everyone by name. “Good morning, Miss Liddy. Your knees must be hurting you today.” “Hello there, Harry. Lydia was looking for you, and my, but she was mad.” “Hello, Maxine, you got a letter today. Maybe it’s from that son of yours.” “Watch out, Charlie, someone spilled water there, and the floor might be slick.”

Eddie was blind. He was born that way. But he didn’t miss a trick. He saw more with his blindness than most of us see with our two good eyes. He saw with his ears, and his gut, and his heart. Sometimes “blind“ is not really blind and “seeing” is not really sight.

This little story comes from a sermon by a priest of the church whose name is Judith Schenck. And with it Judith touches the very heart of this wonderful, complete – some would say long – story from the gospel of John. It is, in fact, an entire chapter of the book of John. And when we look at blindness through the tale of Eddie, it’s clear that everything Jesus did, virtually every act of his earthly ministry, was about bringing sight to the blind.

Because sight does not just have to do with eyes. We’re talking here about inner sight. Spiritual sight. We are all blind in one way or another, but if we allow it, if we are open to it, Jesus will bring us sight. He is the light of the world.

Look with me for a moment at this miracle Jesus performs in the reading this morning and then take the bulletin home and read it again. Perhaps you will see something of yourself in it.

This man, at the beginning of the story is what my friends from Vermont would call “a rimless cypher.” You know, a zero without a line around it. Nothing at all. He has no name, he says nothing, he shows no faith in Jesus, he is just a man who has never been able to see anything. Sightless. In the dark.

Jesus makes mud using his own life-giving breath and the soil of God’s creation. I’m sure the man can feel it on his eyelids. And then Jesus makes him work a bit for his healing. He sends him to wash. How a blind man finds his way to the pool of Siloam we don’t know, but it certainly takes some initiative. And when we see him again the man is telling everyone he can see, and he is the one who was blind.

From here on he answers every question honestly. He knows who changed his life. “Though I was blind, now I see.” Even though the Pharisees speak against Jesus the man does not back away from what he knows happened. He speaks on, with ever-greater courage. “Here is an astonishing thing!” he says. “You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.”

And then, amazingly, he begins to sound like Jesus himself when he says to the Pharisees, “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?” That sounds so much like something Jesus would say to the Pharisees himself.

And they begin to treat him the way they have been treating Jesus, by reviling him. But still, the man is not afraid. He stays, and when Jesus tells him he is the Son of Man, the once-blind man says, “Lord, I believe” and he worships Jesus.

This is a complete transformation. From an empty shell of a person, full of darkness, to a courageous one full of light, in the time it takes to read the 41 verses of chapter 9.

And this transformation gives meaning to Jesus’ answer, at the beginning of the story, to the question of whether the man sinned or his parents sinned, causing his blindness. Jesus says, “He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

So there is hope for all of us, as our blindness, the various kinds of blindness humans are born with or develop, every kind of human imperfection, can be seen as an opportunity for God to be revealed to others as they witness Christ’s healing in each other.

Now, all the while the man born blind is traveling this upward path toward sight and faith and hope, the Pharisees and those who listen to them, those who believe they can already see without the help of Jesus, become more and more spiritually blind.

In the previous chapter of the gospel of John they have openly accused him of being a Samaritan and possessed by the devil. They pick up stones, ready to throw them at him, but he slips through.

Now they follow him, looking for ways to bring him down. The ways they try to do this are, unfortunately, tactics that we will find common in our society, perhaps to some degree in ourselves. Of these we must repent.

First they try to explain away the miracle. This is not the man who used to be blind. He just looks like the man. Even though the once-blind man protests that, indeed, “I am the man.” Do we ever look for ways to explain to our own satisfaction that something was not really a miracle, but has a reasonable, provable explanation? Why do we need to do that if, in fact, we believe that in God all things are possible?

The Pharisees allow themselves to be distracted by whether Jesus keeps the Sabbath or not and they miss the wonder of the healing. In fact, they argue that the miracle did not happen, couldn’t have happened, when there

it is right before their eyes. Do we sometimes get distracted by rules and regulations, in the process of proving that we're right, and miss God's healing work that is taking place right in front of us?

The man's parents are afraid that if they tell what they have seen, they'll alienate the Jewish community of which they are a part. They don't want to be thrown out of their synagogue and the threat of that is real, so they decline to stand up and declare the healing of their son. Are we, like them, not only blind but afraid? Do we just deflect the question of what wonderful things God has done for us and those we love, or do we declare its truth?

Well, finally the Pharisees resort to a tactic which is all too familiar to us. And it's this: if you don't like what you are hearing from another, undermine the speaker. Discredit what is being said and the person saying it, instead of responding honestly to the issue. People do this when they are afraid of losing ground.

I'm afraid we'll be seeing this tactic a lot in the coming months as we approach the election of a new president. It has, unfortunately, become an accepted part of our national politics to undermine the opposition, often with very little truth in the accusations. We'll have to endure it through November, I think, and I hope we'll recognize it for what it is. But we certainly don't have to condone this shabby practice in our own lives.

So, the Pharisees, grasping for some explanation of it all, who have seen the miracle and talked with the man who was given sight, nevertheless return to the argument that, well, he was born in sin and so they should not believe anything he says.

It is the question the story began with, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" And Jesus has already answered it – Neither. This man's blindness is an opportunity for God's healing. He was not blind because he sinned. The Pharisees have understood none of it, from beginning to end. They descend deeper into their own sin, their spiritual blindness, even as the man once blind steps up out of darkness into light.

This matter of discrediting someone with whom we don't agree or someone we don't understand, rather than responding to them in love and honesty, not necessarily agreeing with them but hearing them out and respecting the dignity of their opinion, this is at the heart of one more of the baptismal promises.

Today's question, the one the gospel of John leads us to, is this one: "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

This promise, which we make every time we renew our baptismal vows, is a promise to see more deeply how Christ is present in all people and to encourage their growth in the light of Christ by accepting God's hand in our lives, the Holy Spirit working within us, all of us.

This promise makes us understand that Eddie, in the assisted living home, has an important kind of sight which he shares in a loving, Christ-like way. And that God works differently in each of us. We must stop and see that work in each other and encourage it.

To be baptized in Christ is to speak up against injustice of all kinds, to work for peace, and to love in active ways all those who need us. This is the path to increased sight, the one that leads us out of blindness. Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria