

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

Lent 4A  
St. Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
March 22, 2020  
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## I Once Was Blind

Such a timely gospel reading, isn't it? We're having to "see" things, and each other, in very different ways these days.

The people in today's gospel had a hard time seeing things in new ways too. Even in the face of a healing miracle they still called him the blind man, the man born blind, the man blind from birth. They could identify him only by his limitations, his blindness, even when it no longer existed. After he'd been healed, they called him the man who had formerly been blind.

It's interesting, isn't it? And it causes me to wonder if we don't do that too? How often do we define ourselves in terms of our limitations or our problems or our illnesses? What stories do we tell about our past as though they demonstrate our present and dictate our futures? What stories do we tell about ourselves that are no longer true?

It isn't to say that what has been our history doesn't matter, it does. But when we refer to ourselves as what we were, or talk about ourselves only in terms of what once was, when we do that to others, we tend to leave ourselves in the past without giving attention to our future. That's not a good idea.

There is a wonderful group that meets at St Barnabas – well, they can meet by zoom now.

They are people who have lost deep loves in their lives... partners and spouses mostly, but other loves too. They don't call themselves The Widows and Widowers, though.

They don't call themselves a grief group or even a support group.

They call themselves The Next Chapter. I think that's so beautiful. It's the next chapter – so we know there were chapters before. It's the next chapter – not the last chapter. That way of thinking of themselves honors their past, grounds them in their present and offers a future full of possibility. It's a really good way to see themselves.

Still, it's easy to get stuck in the past. It's true today and it was true in Jesus day too. In today's gospel story, people are stuck in the past. It seems almost impossible for anyone other than Jesus to actually SEE this person as anything other than a blind beggar. We could call it human nature I suppose, or maybe the need to be able to make sense of things. Somebody who has always been a nobody is confusing for us. Somebody who was blind suddenly being able to see turns out to be disturbing and the source of all kinds of fussing, rather than a cause for great celebration, gratitude and praise. We don't like it when we can't explain things – so much so that we often turn to blaming ourselves or others. Who sinned Jesus, this man or his parents?

That was the thinking under the law you know, that physical infirmity was a result of sin. But Jesus says otherwise. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me.”

We do need to be careful here – because quite frankly, the translators did us a great disservice in their translation of this bit of scripture. If we return to the Greek – which can be boring but is actually quite important here - the scripture reads very differently. Listen to the translation directly from the Greek:

Neither this man nor his parents sinned.

In order that God’s works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me.

Do you hear how different that is from “this man was born blind SO that God’s works could be revealed?” That clause was added by the translators, it was not in the original Greek. The point isn’t that God made the man blind so Jesus could make a miracle and prove the power of God. The point is that Jesus sees the suffering and we’re supposed to see it too, so that we can do God’s work in the world.

The scholar who helped me properly understand that scripture passage is a man who is a double amputee. He had cancer as a high school student and he tells a modern day version of this gospel story. Someone said to his mom “Don’t you feel guilty that your son has cancer? If you had fed him the right diet with cancer-fighting anti-oxidants this wouldn’t have happened.” Who sinned, Jesus?

Sometimes its easier to blame someone or something for our circumstances than it is to look at the suffering, and help. It all comes back to the way we see things. Do we see the limitation or do we see possibility?

I’ve been thinking a lot about that in light of our current circumstances. It’s easy to think in terms of limitation these days, when we’re limited to under 50 people, limited to no fewer than 6 feet, limited by rules that say we can’t eat out, can’t go to the museum, can’t go to a gallery or the fabric store or to church. Our identity as Episcopalians, an identity that is deeply rooted in our worship, worship that has, for most of us, happened mostly on Sunday mornings in this building you may not now come in to... our identity might feel like it’s changing. But if we look very closely, we’ll see that our real roots are in our identity as God’s beloved daughters and sons, and our worship identity is rooted in our common prayer. We are a people of common prayer and praying together, whether we’re all in THIS room together, or in our own places... together. We’re still together, and together, we will find our way through this season.

One of the many things Jesus seems to be telling us in this story is that we ought not to be distracted by the things that don’t really matter. That we need to see with the eyes of our hearts. That even though it sometimes feels like we’re walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we need to know ourselves as God’s own beloved and from that identity look at what is happening around us. As it turns out, we need to look for the suffering so that we can do God’s good work of mitigating it, whether it be in our homes, our neighborhoods or the

wider world. Let's stop looking at the limitations. Let's look for the possibilities.  
Let's look for God's future.

What are we fussing about that doesn't really matter? What are we making more important than our relationships? We have the most amazing opportunity here to shift our thinking and ways of being from self-serving to serving others. Whether that means taking only one package of toilet paper because other people need it too, or giving up living the way we used to because we don't have symptoms, or mustering up a boatload of patience, compassion and understanding because we recognize that we're all pretty much operating at the outside edge of our emotional capacity. For lots of us, life feels pretty hard right now and it is absolutely essential that we practice compassion and forgiveness with each other, and with ourselves too.

Everything feels different now, and as hard as that is, God is in all of it, showing us all sorts of new ways to be the face of Christ in the world. We only need to let loose of the blinders we've had the luxury of wearing most all our lives and let ourselves really see what is right in front of us. That can be hard when what we're looking at is suffering. But if we don't look at the suffering, we cannot take our part in mitigating it.

It's Lent. And still, we are resurrection people. And God will bring from this story of a community that cannot come together just yet, a community more closely knit than we could ever have imagined. People you didn't know last week are calling to check up on you. People who are healthy are offering to pick up your prescriptions or your groceries. People you've never heard of are praying for you. We are connecting in ways we would never have connected, loving each other in ways we would never have loved if we hadn't been forced apart, made to slow down, and invited to rethink what it means to be a community with Christ – not our beloved church – but Christ at the center. That, my dears, is one of the many ways God is redeeming this. Look around – see the many ways God is working in the world, and then tell each other the stories. Amen