Bnk 31

Sunday March 17, 1996

A BLIND MAN'S JOURNEY John 9:1-41

Her name was Elizabeth and she was the most affirming person I've ever met. When I came to know her she was a mature woman of thirty-five. She was one of those rare individuals who seem to live in excitement about the possibilities of life. She had a way of seeing beauty where others missed it.

I asked her one day what gave her the ability to see things which others did not see. "Elizabeth," I said, "you always seem to be excited about what you see and what you know you are going to see. Where does that come from?" She looked at me through her thick glasses and said,

"That's easy. I was born blind and unable to see anything until I was six years old. Since then I can never get enough of seeing."

There are some similarities between Elizabeth and the unnamed man in the story from the Gospel of John we are considering today. He too was a person born blind, and one day because of meeting Jesus, he is given the gift of sight. His life was changed and in some ways he didn't expect.

Stories of Jesus healing people who are blind are numerous in the New Testament. The early church remembered these stories not only because of the physical act of healing, but also because such stories carried deeper meanings. Clarity of vision is more than being able to see

with one's eyes the world around us. It also means the possession of knowledge and understanding. In the Biblical tradition, people who choose to remain ignorant of God, or refuse to see God at work, are described as living in the dark--they are blind.

In our own language we frequently use the metaphors of sight and blindness, light and darkness. We say, "She saw the light," meaning that the individual came to a new understanding, a change of perception. And to indicate we understand something, we often say, "I see."

The point is that in the Gospel stories, miracles of the healing of the blind are never recorded merely as acts of physical healing, but carry in addition a broader meaning of coming to understand

God and God's workings in new ways.

Jesus brings people from darkness into light, from blindness to sight. As one verse of an old gospel hymn puts it, "Once I was blind but now I can see, the light of the world is Jesus." These gospel stoies have a message for all of us. Even though we may have the gift of sight with our eyes, we can be blind in other ways. Perhaps we all need to be healed of some form of blindness.

The journey of this particular blind man is especially instructive as is the blindness of the people who knew him, some of whom chose to remain blind even though they could see with their eyes.

There are several themes which need to be explored in this story. One theme is the question of

the relationship between human disabilities or suffering and our sinfulness. Jesus and his disciples meet a man who is described as having been born blind. The disciples wonder if there is any connection between lack of sight and sin? "Who sinned," they ask, "This man or his parents that he was born blind?"

It's an intriguing question for speculation, but no matter what the answer, it has no effect on whether or not the man will be healed.

In this case it's also an irrelevant question because it's based on the wrong assumption--namely that someone's sin is always the cause of any disability or suffering. Sometimes someone's sin could be involved, but rarely is there such a simple direct cause and effect relationship.

In this case, part of the question was not even well thought through. If the cause of the man's blindness was his own sin, then since he had been born blind, he must've sinned while still in his mother's womb. How is it possible for you to sin before you are born?

Furthermore, there is no evidence in the teachings of Jesus that there is always a direct cause and effect relationship between disability and sin. Yet we continue to ask the question. A retarded child is born and perhaps the parents or others ask, "What did we do to deserve this? Why is God punishing us?" There's nothing in the Christian faith which teaches that each calamity that comes to us is the direct result of a particular identifiable sin, or that each disability comes as a punishment for some sin. Rather Jesus said,

"God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust."

In this case, Jesus answered the disciple's question by saying, "It was not that this man or his parents sinned that he was born blind, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him."

Another theme in the story which is different from other stories of healing is that Jesus acts on his own initiative in healing the man's blindness and not in response to the blind man's request or faith. There he is, minding his own tin cup business when the light of the world comes along and opens his eyes, shoving him into the spotlight where people stand in line to question him. Where is the man who did it? How could he do

that? What did he do to you? What do you say about him since he opened your eyes? Not one living soul says, "Thanks be to God." No one asked him what it is like to see for the first time or whether the light hurt his eyes.

This man's faith follows rather than precedes healing. It is after he is healed that his journey to faith begins. There are times when healing takes place within us as an unanticipated surprise gift, as something we didn't ask for or expect.

The third and main theme in the story is the blindness of others who believe they can see clearly. There were those who refused to accept that this man who could now see was the same man who had been born blind. Still others refused to accept the fact that Jesus healed the man. And still others criticized Jesus for healing the man on

the Sabbath.

There are always those among us who have trouble considering anything new, no matter what the evidence. Some people seem to be born with closed minds. I know people who have not been willing to consider a new idea since they were born.

Others of us are not blind from birth, but become blind as we grow older. We put on blinders and refuse to look at any new evidence on any subject. Some even say, "Even though I've seen it with my own eyes, I refuse to believe it."

Institutions can be blind in the same way as individuals. All the world knows of the pressure the church exerted on Galileo to force him to recant

what the church called his false and heretical theory that the earth was not the center of the universe, and that the earth and other known planets revolved around the sun instead. Later in history, the chemical manufacture of diamonds was delayed for decades because a chemist of genius was forced to recant and declare in public that he had not manufactured diamonds but made a mistake in an experiment.

Consider the suffering and tragedy which the blindness of prejudice has caused through the centuries. The blindness that teaches that one group of people is inferior or superior by reason of the color of their skin has caused more inno-cent suffering than almost any other kind of blind-ness.Medical science has its own kind of blind-ness. Twenty years before Pasteur stated his

theory of germ-caused disease, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. in the United States and Ignaz Semmelweis in Vienna, were claiming that germs or what we now call bacteria on doctor's hands caused infection and often death in surgery. All they wanted the physicians to do was to wash their hands before doing surgery or examining their patients. Both of these men went down in utter defeat- -Holmes retiring to write essays and humorous poetry while Semmelweis was driven out of his mind into an asylum and to an early death.

"Are we also blind?" asked the critics of Jesus. For them it was a rhetorical question, but it should've been a question which they and we seriously ask ourselves.

The truth is we all have our own kinds of blindness or blind spots and the journey from blindness to sight is not always an easy one. We resist being healed of our blindness because we are so comfortable with our old way of doing and seeing things. We don't want to be confused with new facts and knowledge. Then we would have to re-arrange all of our thinking.

Furthermore, overcoming whatever blindness we have can cause problems for us that we hadn't anticipated. The man in the story who was healed no doubt thought at several points that it would've been better to stay blind because other people did not accept him very readily after he was healed. The gift of sight caused him trouble that he had not expected.

than away from difficulties. A relationship with God does not remove one from but often places one in the line of fire. Those who preach faith as the cessation of pain, suffering, poverty, restless nights and turbulent days are offering false comfort. Consider what happened to this man on his journey from blindness to sight, from doubt to believing. After he was healed, he went home, but was not accepted there anymore. His neighbors knew how to deal with him as a blind man, but not as a person who could see.

So radical was the change in him that his reappearance in the old neighborhood generated no joy, no celebration, no welcome home, only criticisms, questions and doubts. Why was it that his old friends and neighbors had so much difficulty in being happy with his good fortune? Why is it

Jesus healed him and then disappeared, leaving him to face the critics all alone. He now has to try to make some sense out of what happened to him and decide what he will say about it in the face of enormous opposition.

Being blessed by God does not take away all problems or opposition. He could've understandably said to himself more than once, "I never asked to be healed. If this is what it means to be blessed of God, I think I am willing to relinquish some divine favors." He discovered that the good deed done to him was now causing him to be the center of controversy. I think it was Nietzche who said, "No good deed goes unpunished."

This story indicates as do other Biblical stories, the truth that God's favor often leads into rather

that we have so much trouble rejoicing at the good fortune of others? Why is it that we are so cynical about changes for the good in others? We don't always like it when people become something different from what they had always been even when it has changed them for the better.

The healed man's troubles were not over. He was hauled before the religious authorities. They were interested in all reported miracles, especially if performed by unauthorized individuals and if done in violation of some law. In this case the healing took place on the Sabbath. How could this be? If the man was truly healed, it was done by the power of God working through someone, but if the healing took place on the Sabbath, then it had to be done by someone working against

God's rules. The critics could not conceive of God working in any other way than by their own definitions. They believe it is their job to decide whether or not this healing constitutes an authentic act of God. It is their job to certify where God is at work and where God is not at work.

This should not surprise us. We have our own anxiety about whether or not a mighty act should be ascribed to God, or whether a group that is different from us is doing God's work.

A devout homemaker in Conyers, Georia, is drying her hands at the kitchen sink when she looks out the window and sees the Virgin Mary in her backyard. Is it God or not? A Lakota medicine man performs a healing service for a seminarian with lymphoma and the cancer goes away. Is it

God or not?

There are a lot of astounding things that happen in the world that may not have anything to do with the power of God. They may only have to do with the power of the human imagination or the power of suggestion, (although God can certainly work through our imaginations and the power of suggestion) or worse yet the power of outright deception. What if something is not of God and we believe that it is?

The story of this blind man's journey suggests that there is another question at least as important as that one. Not "What if it is not God and I believe that it is?" But, "What if it is God and I believe that it is not?" That is the one question the critics of this healing forgot to ask and it's a

question we forget to ask. They were so sure of everything-- that God did not work on Sundays, that Moses was God's only spokesman, that anyone born blind had to be a sinner and the same for anyone who broke the sabbath, that God did not work through sinners and that furthermore no one could teach them anything.

The good news is that the story ends with the healed man becoming a follower of Jesus. He was healed of more than physical blindness. The story poses a crucial question for each one of us and that question is the one which the religious authorities asked Jesus--"Are we also blind?"

Everytime journeys like this one repeat themselves in our time, we have an opportunity to be primarily a critic or we can say, "Thanks be to

God for working in ways we hadn't even considered." Amen.