Becoming Human: Seeing with the heart

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Lent 4: April 3, 2011

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

Our theme for Lent this year is Becoming Human. Our banner reminds us each week that there are lots of ways to look human. The scriptures have illustrated for us that being and becoming human is a challenge that we all deal with.

The first Sunday, we read about Jesus himself claiming his humanness — even when the tempter three times waves in front of him the allure of becoming God. Then there is Nicodemus, a man of God and of the religious institution, who can't wrap his mind around what it means to embrace the God questions that can make him human and renew his faith.

Last week, we saw Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman. She is certainly in touch with her humanness and how that excludes her from the community. Jesus helps her see that she can reach beyond herself and her situation to receive new life.

Today, Jesus meets a person born blind. This person is passed by and scorned by most and yet Jesus sees the possibilities in this person who has been relegated to sitting beside the road. In the end, it is not the blind one's humanness Jesus calls into question, but that of the religious leaders'. Jesus says that those who would claim their place at the top of the power pyramid have

a long way to go until they understand what it means to be human, what it means to love God.

The story begins with the assumption by the disciples, then by the religious leaders, perhaps even by the man and his parents themselves, that someone sinned, and the result is blindness. Everyone seems stuck in this way of thinking. While holy spit and dirt make a healing mud for the man who is blind, it does nothing to clear the sight of the rest of the people in the story.

However, it cannot be denied that the person who was blind now sees. He is no longer forced to sit at the edges of society and hope for recognition. Jesus has seen him, has shined the light and now the one who could not see, walks in the light.

But the light that allows one person to see, seems to blind others. The neighbors cannot reconcile this new person with the one they knew before. It makes no sense that one who is born blind can suddenly see. They go to the Pharisees for assistance.

Thankfully the religious leaders see everything; they are not blind. They see that the neighbors are confused by the situation and that authoritative help is needed in this baffling situation. They see that a purported act of healing happened on the Sabbath. They see the law regarding the Sabbath and work. They see that healing is work, and work is not allowed on the Sabbath. They see that breaking the Sabbath law makes one a sinner. They see that this man Jesus must be a sinner.

The religious leaders also see the proper place for those who have a disability, and it is not the synagogue. In fact, it is not clear that this one has been healed at all. But even if he is healed, the claims he is making about Jesus are outlandishly heretical. In the end, the once-blind person is declared a sinner as well.

The first time the religious leaders hear the miraculous tale they can not agree on the situation. *Some of the Pharisees said, "This Jesus cannot be from God, because he doesn't keep the Sabbath." But others argued, "How could a sinner perform signs like these?" And they were sharply divided.*

There is no agreement on the sin, the sinner, the role of Jesus or what should happen in the situation. But after interviewing the formerly blind man then speaking with his parents and then asking the man back for a second interview, they see the situation quite clearly. Their differences begin to fade and they unite in throwing the man out of the synagogue.

Being thrown out of the synagogue was a real threat for the first hearers and readers of the gospel of John. Sixty-plus years after the death of Jesus, 30-some years after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem, there was more than a little tension among the faithful about how to be faithful. The Messiah followers were more and more likely to be thrown out and to find themselves on the outside of the traditional religious structures. John's gospel is written in the context of an unfolding new community trying to live out what it means to understand Jesus as the Word, Jesus as the I AM.

The man's parents illustrate the real worry that Jesus' followers had about speaking their truth to the religious authorities. The parents don't want to say anything about Jesus or even much about their son, as it may jeopardize their own place in the synagogue. They are not eager to be cut off from family and community, so they pass the task back to their son to speak for himself. (Ironically, they cut themselves off from their son when he is thrown out.)

All of the gospels include stories of Jesus healing a blind person. Matthew, Mark and Luke all feature a blind man sitting by the side of the road, begging. Mark even gives us his name, Bartimaeus. The man cries out to Jesus as Jesus' disciples and "a great multitude" pass by.

Unlike John, where the man neither begs nor cries out, Bartimaeus calls out, "Son of David, have mercy on me." Jesus asks what he wants. Bartimaeus says he wants to see. And immediately he does see — without the assistance of mud or spit, without going to the pool of Siloam as the man must in John. Jesus says it is Bartimaeus' faith that heals and saves him. (Matthew 20:29-34, Mark 10:46-52, Luke 18:35-43)

Then there is great rejoicing by the one who is healed as well as by the gathered crowd. There is no confusion about the situation; it is clear in Matthew, Mark and Luke that this occasion calls for everyone to praise God.

John's gospel gives us a very different take on what it means to be healed from blindness. It is not the man's faith that heals him, though after the healing he does seem to have new belief and insight into who Jesus is. But in John, the healing of the blind one is almost incidental.

John's story begins after a long and contemptuous episode with the religious authorities in the temple. (John 8) At the end of the chapter, Jesus escapes as they prepare to stone him. Chapter 9 opens with Jesus walking along the road with his disciples and they observe a quiet, blind, man at the side of the road. The disciples start in with their questions about sin and blindness. Jesus says it is not sin that should concern them, but the ability to see God at work.

It is the response of the community, and specifically the religious leaders that occupies most of John's lengthy narrative. While the healed one tells his story over and over it doesn't seem to become clearer to those who are listening. The light Jesus speaks of seems to have shined only on the one at the side of the road, not on those who see the change. The neighbors are unsure, even the man's parents are unwilling to say too much. The religious leaders have such a hold on the truth that those who would disagree fear voicing their own understandings.

I am grateful that the gospels give us several versions of healing from blindness. This season I am particularly drawn to John's version, with its eye toward the struggling community that fears being thrown out of the synagogue. I have no trouble finding my way into this story as I root for the one born blind who now sees. He struggles to speak of his experience and explain his encounter with Jesus.

As requested, the man appears before the religious leaders to explain what happened, but his story is not deemed credible or acceptable. He now walks in the light, and yet he is not understood. He is thrown out.

When the religious leaders hear Jesus explaining himself to the new believer — that he came into the world to make the sightless see and the seeing blind — the light begins to dawn on them. The leaders ask defensively, “You aren’t calling us blind, are you?”

We are all invited to examine the ways that we, even those of us who have fairly good vision, are blind. When do we look right through people instead of seeing them? How can we open our eyes and our hearts to see the light that is shining and the people that walk in that light?

While the religious leaders in John think they see, as readers of the story we understand that Jesus sees even more clearly. He shines a light on the law revealing how it can become a barrier to compassion and justice. He sees that devout followers of the commandments sometimes miss what is right in front of them. He sees that blind eyes are no indication of sin and that seeing eyes are no guarantee of virtue.

May we open our eyes and our hearts to see the light that produces every kind of goodness, justice and truth. Let us live as children of the light. (Ephesians 5:8-9)