"What's Your Blind Man Story?"

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Text: John 9: 13 -34
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Lent is a spiritual season during which we do two kinds of reflection. We reflect on the stories of Jesus, especially the stories that lead to the cross of Good Friday and what Christ has done for us. Our other Lenten reflection is on the life we live as Christians. These two reflections are to deepen our appreciation of Christ's gift of new life for us and how we are living in that new life. To put it another way, Lent is intended to prompt us to reflect on what my faith means to me. I think for a lot of us, including me, this can be hard to figure out because our Lenten reflections ask us to put two stories into dialogue with each other: the stories of faith and the story of our own lives. We are not alone in finding this challenging. In fact, one of the longest stories in the gospels is the struggle of a person trying to do this himself.

My heart goes out this blind man every time I read this story. Born blind, he was likely reduced to begging to maintain his existence, such as it was. This day would have been like any other day, except a group of passers by noticed him. He may well have overheard this conversation about him—not with him, but about him right in front of him. Next Jesus put mud on his eyes and directed him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. Again, we don't hear in the story that anyone actually engaged the blind man…or talked to the blind man. It sounds like he was the object of discussion and action. The story suggests that it was common knowledge that Jesus was a miracle worker and that people were speculating he was the Messiah. Perhaps the blind man knew all this too as he left to do Jesus' bidding. But then this dramatic plot twist in his own life story: he gained sight for the first time in his life. As we hear him say later to the Pharisees, "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind." This miraculous occurrence was now part of his life story, no question. But he had to make sense of his story. "Where does the story of God fit into my story now? Does the life of God intersect with my life here?"

The once blind man was not alone in trying to figure this all out. Bystanders were astonished by what happened. People who knew that he'd been blind were peppering him with questions! How did you get your sight? What's your story? How did this happen? You can't be the blind man we knew, so who are you? People wanted a story…some kind of story that could make sense of what they'd just seen. His parents knew the story but they were scared to talk about it. Apparently it was dangerous for anyone to say that Jesus was the Messiah because that could get them in deep trouble with the Pharisees, lead to their expulsion from the synagogue and perhaps alienation. Better not make this another miracle story about Jesus! So the blind man's parents refused to make sense of the story. "Hey" they said, "our son's all grown up. You want the story, get it from him."

Then there were the Pharisees. They wanted the story too! But they wanted a story that fit neatly into their preconceived understanding of how the world worked, how God worked, how

their faith was to be understood. The blind man's story had to fit into the Pharisees narrative box. And what was that box? First, in the eyes of the Pharisees what happened may not have been a miracle. Then, if it was a miracle, Jesus performed it on the Sabbath, breaking the Law that prohibited work on the Sabbath. Then there was the rumour going around that Jesus could be the Messiah…and that would be just wrong! So they said, yes God can do such miracles. But not Jesus. He is a sinner. The Pharisees could not accept that Jesus really had anything to do with how the blind man came to gain sight. So they were having trouble figuring out a storyline that made sense to them.

People experienced something startling. The facts of the story were one thing. But everyone in the story, including the blind man himself, had to figure out for themselves what those facts really meant, and the implications for them. And that was…is…easier said than done. As readers of this story, we peer over the shoulders of the witnesses in this dramatic story. We too hear the blind man lay out the facts, "He put mud in my eyes, then I washed and now I see." So like everyone in the story we too need to make sense of the story for ourselves and distill our own meaning from the story.

As I said, that is easier said than done because in the case of this story something quite "impossible" happened. The Biblical scholar Marcus Borg wrote we can read a story like this in three different ways. The first way he calls the pre-critical perspective, which is how Christians understood the story for centuries. The Gospel of John was considered an historic account of Jesus' life and so the healing of the man born blind must have factually happened. There are many Christians in the world today who maintain this point of view and thus consider this story actual history. But Borg points out that the point of view of many people has shifted over the past 300 years with the advent of critical reasoning, and that brings a different perspective. For example, a good number of Christians do not believe that the earth was created in 6 days about 5,000 years ago. It doesn't make reasonable sense; besides, the physical evidence suggests the contrary. Some, from a critical reasoning perspective, dismiss a miracle like restoring sight to the man born blind as impossible because they think miracles don't happen so this didn't happen. One could say that this way of approaching our story is "understanding seeking faith." When something doesn't make reasonable sense, like a miracle, then the story can be dismissed. But if we do that—simply dismiss the story of the restoration of sight to a blind man—then we can overlook what we can draw from the story. "Understanding seeking faith" I believe can lead to diminished faith.

So Marcus Borg suggested a third perspective for us who have been fully steeped in critical reasoning. He suggested that we can read the story with a naivety. Rather than simply accept the story as history or dismiss it outright as unreasonable, Borg suggested that the story of the man born blind can be understood as carrying a truth…whether one thinks the event actually really happened or not. So, going back to today's story of Jesus, what is the truth it is conveying for us? As we notice again and again, Jesus was a disrupter. Time and again in his teaching and ministry (not just miracles) what Jesus said and did surprised people, challenged their thinking, prompted them to reframe their understanding of God and faith, and caused some people to live differently. This is played out as a grand pageant in the story of the man born blind, for in

the story everyone was trying to make sense of the healing. Some of the people it seems never came up with an answer. The blind man's parents wanted to ignore the healing because they didn't like the implications. The Pharisees wanted to squeeze the facts into their preconceived box. Others simply believed, and came to appreciate that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. What we find here is all normal, still normal. So if we struggle with our beliefs about the Jesus of the gospels, take comfort: thus it was ever so.

This third approach—to read with a naivety that seeks to find the truth in the story—is actually not a new approach. The Bishop of Canterbury in England in 1000 AD was a man named Anselm. He called this approach "faith seeking understanding." For all of us, faith is our starting point, and it is from that starting point that we approach a story like this. So if we approach this story as faithful Christians with "faith seeking understanding" then what we want from the story is something that will make our faith more understandable to us. For me, I believe Jesus performed miracles. Whether he actually performed this specific miracle or not I do not know. But the New Testament is incredibly consistent in its assertion that Jesus did. And when Jesus did, people saw a power in him that many believed could only come from God. And with that meaning in mind, 1,000's of people listened seriously to Jesus teaching. For if Jesus' power could only come from God then Jesus' message must have as well. And that is how the gospels ask us to understand the stories of the miracles: as encouragement to us to take Jesus' teachings seriously.

Lent puts into dialogue the stories of faith and the stories of our own lives. In the reflections of Lent we are invited to ask, "what do the stories of faith mean to me, and mean for how I live my life?" But we can also reflect on the events of our own life, asking what those moments mean to me and my faith as well. After all, that is what the bystanders in our story where trying to figure out. "That thing that I just witnessed, what really happened and what should it mean to me?"

A small example: my dad and stepmother were highly skeptical about Christianity. In contrast, my brother and I were highly involved in our church. Through my teen years we'd have regular talks about God, especially on Sunday nights before we went off to youth group. They would point out the inconsistencies of faith and the shortcomings of the faithful. My brother and I were not persuaded to let go of our beliefs, so eventually an unofficial truce was declared. We all simply stopped talking about God, and things remained that way for several years. But in my mid-20's I decided that I wanted that to change – I wanted to help them appreciate why Christ was so important to me. The idea of doing it made me very nervous, and I prayed, "Dear God, please give me an opportunity to talk about faith with my parents." A while later I went to visit them with the conviction that this conversation was going to happen. But as we spent the day and dinner together, I couldn't bring myself to raise the topic. I was too nervous. The next day I didn't say anything again, and that truce of silence continued. Later while doing the dishes with my stepmother, she suddenly turned to me, and right out of the blue she asked me, "Do you believe God answers prayers?" After I got over the initial shock I said, "Well, I do now". How come that happened? Was it just a wild coincidence or did God respond to my prayer and nudge the conversation into being? Nudge it for my sake because I was too scared to take the

initiative? I had to think about that for a long while. The facts were clear, and what I needed to do was figure out the meaning. Long before I learned about a guy named Anselm, I fell into "faith seeking understanding" as my approach to understand that moment. My reflections zoomed in on my stepmother's question, "do you believe that God answers prayer?" As a general tenet of faith my answer was "yes." But was this specific moment a specific example of what I believed? In time I had to say to myself, "it is the only answer."

So what can happen when we read stories of Jesus and ask ourselves, "what does this story mean for me? What is the truth in this story?" What can happen when we look at an experience like I had and ask ourselves, "what does this experience mean for me? What is the truth in it?" What can happen is what eventually happened to the man who had been born blind. After being set free by the Pharisees, Jesus asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" Perhaps the man had not yet found the meaning in his own experience, because he responded to Jesus, saying, "Tell me who he is, so I might believe in him." "He is the one speaking to you right now" Jesus said. It appears that the penny dropped at that very moment, with the man born blind putting 2 and 2 together. He found the meaning in his own story. "LORD, I believe in you", he said. And the man worshipped Jesus his new Lord.