

## ***Once blind, now, beginning to see***

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

This story of the blind man invites so many questions for me, a modern follower of Jesus. Scottish theologian and storyteller, John Bell, led a workshop that I attended a number of years ago. He gave us an exercise, in groups of 3, to improvise this scene – the Bible story of the man born blind, Jesus, and religious leaders. We were to play out the scene, each of us having a chance to particularly be the man born blind.

I don't know if you notice the way I say that – “the man born blind” rather than the blind man, or the blind beggar. I'm slowly learning to see, not the blindness, but, to see the person. In recent times, I've come to understand my own “ableism”, to drop the boards from my eyes as I unconsciously define a person by a condition that they might have. We do attach labels, we put people in cognitive slots. What if, instead of imagining that man as needing help, I instead consider that he might have acquired some impressive skills? He probably learned how to be persuasive, to be very patient, engaging people as they passed.

Let's see again this Gospel story from John, let us sit where that person born blind sits, listening to people pass by. We encounter a stranger, we hear him called teacher, Jesus, and students with him are debating about what sin I must have committed to be rendered blind. How does that feel?

It is hard to make out exactly what happened next, the stranger, Jesus, bending down, touching me, and suddenly I can see colours, people. There is a sense of shock. People who were just voices are now looking at me in uncomfortable ways. I'm then launched into a major investigation by the religious authorities.

John Bell's point, a good one, in that exercise, was to help us see that, unlike in other passages where a person who had leprosy, the woman who dealt with bleeding, a person who cannot see, they asked for help. This man did not ask. Jesus helped the man to see as part of teachable moment. You see, Jesus' friends caught up in ancient urban myth widely held that ailments were a direct result of some sin the person committed, or the person's parents. Jesus performs a wonder, without asking first. The person once blind but now who can see probably had a great gig going, but now, finds themselves thrust into a polarizing theological inquiry.

“All I know, is that I was once blind, but now I see.”

If this scene played out in our modern time, what might have happened. The man accusing Jesus of harassment? Of course, I'm being facetious, but our modern era has opened our eyes to sins of our Christian ancestors. Judgments we make about a person without first sitting where they sit. Calling someone disabled and presuming that they would want to be healed, when perhaps they feel just fine. Perhaps we find out what they want, how they feel. Maybe we are the blind ones, like the religious leaders in the Gospel story, using the poor man as a pretext to catch Jesus.

Ironic, isn't it – that man may very well have had a decent life. He might not have seen, literally, but perhaps he saw more than the people who claimed to be the intellectuals, the leaders.

Imagining ourselves as that man born blind; how would we feel?

There are countless people born with vulnerabilities that our culture presumes need healing, or fixing, or changing. People I see pushing carts, carrying their bags around that they don't want taken. There is probably not a safe locker for it. My social and economic place in our merciless system, as benevolent as Canada is, it is still brutal to those who don't fit. My first, gut, response to the sight of people ambling down the street is sympathy. I am, we are, programmed, blinded to the emotional, the structural reality of people of many who suffer.

Here at St. Andrew's, our curse, I suggest, is a blessing also. We have no choice, coming downtown, but to experience the cognitive dissonance. We wish we could have the gilded past of church; days where the reality of poverty and suffering was less visible. How does that make you, me, feel, to consider that, possibly, we are the blind ones, beginning to see.

I wonder what happened after this story? My guess is that the guy, now able to physically see, but his whole life is probably turned upside down. Perhaps he didn't join the strange group of followers of Jesus who collectively called themselves "The Way." Perhaps Jesus, not seeing the man jump for joy in gratitude, experienced a bit of discomfort himself? I feel uneasy, having the audacity to suggest that Jesus was human, and perhaps made errors of judgment.

For the Gospel of John, the metaphor of "Seeing" is central. Not seeing, literally. Seeing, spiritually. Is that our journey this Lent? I think it is. Seeing, noticing people and situations, even the difficult details that cause us to possibly re-evaluate our opinions and beliefs. Before we make a judgment about someone – whether a family member or a stranger who we have no inclination to get to know – care we not, in fact, called by Jesus to empathize with that person, to sit where she or he sits, feeling their feelings of judgment from the world?

The easy analysis compels us to say that blindness is physical. Much harder to see from John the Gospel writer's perspective; that, perhaps, the people who enjoy privilege, warmth, supports, are the most prone to blindness, spiritually. We are still recovering from the disconnection, isolation, fear, of a pandemic that has changed us. We are in a new normal. I'd like to think that Jesus might have taken time to learn about how the person born blind was experiencing their new life, the jarring change. Perhaps Jesus would try to empathize, to connect, rather than image too often learned of the nomadic Jesus, flitting from place to place, "doing" things to people - healing them, touching them – but then quickly moving on. Perhaps I can add a story that is not in the Gospel - Jesus, connecting with that man born blind, now able to see, after all the interrogation. Perhaps, in this added story, Jesus hears the man's frustrations, his fear as he tries to figure out how he will cope with this huge change in his life.

This is holy conversation and connection that we are called to post-pandemic. Letting go of our blindness caused by fear, polarization, all the "isms" enculturated in us – ablism, anti-semitism, racism, sexism. How can we truly "see" one another, really listen. Maybe one time this coming week, we mindfully connect with just one person, whether a family member or a stranger, but out of listening to them, empathizing, we come to see them in a different light. Faith opens our eyes to SEE the world in, often, radical new ways. Amen.