

**Observing Lent:
Seeing What We're Missing**

Ruth Haley Barton

“Spiritual masters often refer to a kind of “dread,” the nagging sense that we have missed something important and have been somehow untrue—to ourselves, to others, to God. Lent is a good time to confront the source of that feeling. It is a time to let go of excuses for failings and shortcomings; a time to stop hanging on to whatever shreds of goodness we perceive in ourselves; a time to ask God to show us what we really look like.”

from Bread and Wine: Readings for Easter and Lent

The lectionary readings for this week offer us John 9—the story of the blind man who received his sight through an encounter with Jesus. It is a story about blindness and healing, but it is not so much about physical blindness; it is about the spiritual blindness that keeps us from recognizing spiritual reality as it unfolds right in front of our eyes. The healing itself takes place early in John’s account, but the real story is about religious people like ourselves who were blind to the presence of Christ among them. They were incapable of “seeing” the works of God taking place right there in their midst. It is a story that pierces the heart.

Everyone in this story is blind—the beggar, the disciples, the Pharisees, the man’s neighbors and his parents. The irony, of course, is that the man who is physically blind is the only one who “sees” with any kind of spiritual insight. His ability to “see” Christ with the eyes of blind faith and the simplicity of his testimony, even under duress, is an indictment on all of us who have made our faith more complicated than it needs to be.

From Blindness to Sight

There are so many stories in the New Testament about Jesus healing blind people that one begins to get the idea that it is a metaphor for the spiritual journey itself—the journey from spiritual blindness to a way of seeing that enables us to perceive who God is, who God is for us and what God is doing in the world around us.

In John 9, everyone saw the same man healed, but they all had difficulty recognizing it as the work of God and naming it for what it was. The disciples got caught up in a theological question that was really just a cover for our human tendency to assign blame and shame. “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” What a dehumanizing question! And how it distanced them from the tragedy of the human situation huddled right there in front of them! Devoid of any compassion, it was a question that placed a real person, caught in a real human dilemma, under the microscope of their theological debate rather than allowing their hearts to be moved.

The good news is that Jesus did not allow himself to be dragged down a theological rabbit trail. Instead, he patiently explained that they were bringing up the wrong issue, asking the wrong question. The real question, he pointed out, was *What is God doing? What is the work of God about to be revealed in this very human situation? What are the spiritual possibilities contained in this moment?* His words, coupled with his compassionate action, illustrated more about the person and the purposes of God than any theological debate ever could.

After he opened the disciples’ eyes to what was going on spiritually, he proceeded to heal the man. Despite his physical blindness, this man “saw” the spiritual possibilities

that the disciples had missed. His willingness to enter in to that reality with faith made this the day of his healing.

What Real Blindness Looks Like

The real tragedy of this situation is the fact that what should have been a moment of great celebration became a moment of religious controversy among the people who witnessed it. The neighbors who had seen this blind man every day were so stuck in the paradigms of what they already knew that they couldn't take in any new information. (9:8-12) A blind man who could now see did not fit into their preconceived ideas of how the world works; their cognitive filters just filtered it out. When asked if this man whom they had known as a blind beggar all these years was indeed the man who had been healed, some said yes but others hemmed and hawed. Struggling to figure out the politically correct thing to say, they hedged by saying it was someone *like* him. And all the while, the blind man just stuck to his story. *"The man called Jesus made mud, spread it onto my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."*

The Pharisees had their own set of issues. They were particularly concerned about preserving the religious system of the day and protecting their place in it. But the parameters of their religious experience were very narrow. They were only able to acknowledge and receive ideas and experiences that fit in with what they already believed. Their need to remain in control of the system that gave them their identity caused them to be rigid, judgmental and uncaring in the face of a real human being who had a real need. Compassion had little place in their program. They were much more

attached to their traditions—represented in this case by a legalistic approach to keeping the Sabbath.

The Scriptures are quite “in your face” about the fact that Jesus violated the religious norms for Sabbath-keeping. John wants us to know that *it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. (9:14)* The fact that Jesus chose to do this healing work on the Sabbath set the Pharisees on edge. Rather than being able to celebrate a divine intervention in the life of this downtrodden human being, they grilled him and his parents about exactly what happened. They never were able to fully affirm the goodness of God in his life. The saddest part is that they were so blind to their own blindness.

The Jews who were looking on, took their cue from these religious leaders and jumped into the fray as well. They wanted to make sure that there was not some grand manipulative scheme going on so they questioned the man’s parents about the circumstances around his birth and his blindness. But the blind man’s parents were common people. They were the defenseless poor just trying to survive in a religious system that was oppressive and exploitive. They were out of their league. Because they were afraid of being expelled from the only spiritual community they knew, they were only willing to take their testimony so far. Even though they had witnessed a miracle, they stopped just short of saying so. *Yes, he is our son. Yes, he was born blind. But how was he healed? He is of age, ask him. We can’t answer on the grounds that our answer might incriminate us.*

A Tale of Two Journeys

The story of the man born blind is the story of the conflict between an illiterate beggar who *could* see and the religious leaders who could not. It is the juxtaposition of two journeys—one was the journey of the blind man (and hopefully the disciples!) to increasing levels of spiritual sight. The other was a more tragic journey—the journey of the Pharisees as they moved deeper and deeper into increasing levels of spiritual blindness. Their interaction ends with the haunting image of the Pharisees driving the beggar out of their midst because they could not get him to change his story so it would fit their religious understanding. In so doing, they dismissed the very person who had had a real encounter with Christ and could tell about it.

By the time we get to the end of the story, the Pharisees' ability to think logically was so clouded by their unconscious need to preserve the status quo that they started throwing out arguments that barely made sense. But while their minds were being darkened, the beggar's logic was becoming clearer and more compelling. *"We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and does his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that someone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."* (9:30-33)

When I get to this part of the story everything in me wants to rise up and say "Hallelujah!" even though we're not supposed to say Hallelujah during Lent.

I want to shout to the man born blind, "You tell 'em!"

And I want to say to God, "Help me to see myself so clearly as the blind beggar that when Jesus comes my way with mud and saliva and instructions about how to wash, I am willing to go out and do it right away. And when you do that great thing of which

we could only dream, help me to stand on the side of the beggar and acknowledge it for the miracle that it is rather than pretending that nothing happened! And when, by your grace, I am able to see again, don't let me back down from what I have experienced. Let me be one who stands on this unshakeable testimony: *"All I know is that once I was blind but now I see."*

Surely We're Not Blind, Are We?

The Pharisees were blind to the end. They could not face the possibility that in all of their religiosity they were missing something. If we follow the story through to its conclusion we might find that as hard as it is to identify with the blind man, it is even harder to identify ourselves as the Pharisees. But we must. We must acknowledge the fact that we huddle in our own little groups barely able to choke out the words, *Surely we are not blind, are we?*

And Jesus says to us, *If you were blind and able to admit it, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see," your sin remains.* (9:41)

Lent is a season for acknowledging our spiritual blindness and crying out to God to help us see what is in our blind spot. Stripped of the distractions that keep us living in our illusions, we are able to see ourselves more clearly for who we are and acknowledge that we are missing something. We are able to admit that we are so blinded by our own paradigms and programs, our fears and our filters that we cannot see the kingdom of God as it unfolds right in front of our eyes. It is a time for doing whatever Jesus tells us to do in response to our growing awareness of our blindness and our need for healing.

As uncomfortable as it is for those of us who are Christian leaders to admit to our true condition, Jesus says that admitting to our blindness is the first step towards receiving our sight. Let's take that first step together.

Practice

As a part of your Lenten discipline, spend a few moments quietly in Jesus' presence and ask *Who am I in this story and what am I missing?*

- Am I the blind man who is deeply aware of his blindness?
- Am I the disciples who couldn't see because they were all tangled up in the wrong question?
- Am I the neighbors whose paradigms were so fixed that they couldn't see anything that was outside of those paradigms?
- Am I the Pharisees who were so intent on maintaining the status quo that they couldn't recognize a miracle when it had taken place right there in front of them?
- Am I the parents who witnessed something extraordinary but were afraid to speak of it for fear of being ostracized or dismissed?

Ask Jesus to open your eyes and show you who you are and who he is in relation to your need. Receive his touch and listen for his instructions about what you need to do in order to be healed. Then do it quickly and to the best of your ability.

Lord,

I believe

my life is touched by you,

that you want something for me

and of me.
Give me ears
to hear you,
eyes
to see the tracing of your finger,
and a heart
quickened by the motions
of your Spirit.¹

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¹ Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace* (Philadelphia, PA : Innisfree Press, 1984), p.29.