

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Fourth Sunday in Lent/March 26, 2017

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Jesus' disciples upon seeing a man congenitally blind asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" We are reading the Book of Job at our Wednesday morning Bible Study. One of Job's comforters named Bildad isn't very comforting. Job has lost everything even his children. Bildad explained, "if your children sinned, God gave them their due." They got what was coming to them – not very comforting. But it is also what the disciples reason. Someone must have done something wrong for a man to be born blind. We experience the same logic today when we say, "What did I ever do to deserve this?" Years ago I was visiting someone in the hospital who had precisely that question. Well, he didn't do anything to deserve what he was going through. Still, that is the way he felt. Maybe we've been there, too. Perhaps it is not a very far step from the logic of you get what you deserve to ridiculing one who is different, blind, lame, disabled in some way, an outsider. The Pharisees reviled the man born blind whom Jesus had healed. They mocked him. Perhaps we have witnessed this sort of behavior as well. It reinforces the other's status, the one who is handicapped, as an outsider.

So let's take a minute and explore what the Bible has to say about being an outsider. In the Gospel of John we have to be a bit careful. John uses the phrase "the Jews" when what he means is the hostile Jerusalem authorities. We hear that the blind man's parents were afraid of the Jews. The Jews were not outsiders where today's anti-Semitism might wrongly place them. No, in John's story everyone is Jewish. It is the authorities, who have the power to expel someone from the community, of whom the man's parents are justly fearful.

Samuel in the Bible lesson today is an outsider. David is an outsider. Perhaps the listener to the story is an outsider. The man born blind is an outsider. Even Jesus is an outsider. Samuel has just delivered the news to King Saul that God has chosen another to lead Israel. Samuel worries that the king might kill him. God is teaching Samuel something of what it means to be an outsider. God sends him to Jesse to anoint one of his sons as this new leader. Jesse brings before Samuel his seven sons, each one more striking than the other. We are told that “the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” Three times in the story we hear that the Lord has not chosen any of these sons. The new leader is not among the seven, seven being a number signifying completion. But there is one more, an outsider, the youngest. And they wait until David, the shepherd boy, can come before them. Shepherds were not a valued occupation. David has no social claim. But when David arrives Samuel and frankly even the storyteller are dazzled by his appearance. And we are told that the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him.

In the gospel story the blind man and even Jesus are outsiders. Both are accused of being sinners – the man for being blind and Jesus for healing on the Sabbath when no work was to be done. They are ridiculed and are both driven out of the community.

What does God see in the outsider? In Samuel, God sees someone who is willing to wait and discern God’s intention especially when it is unexpected. What counts with God is a right heart. What matters is what a person really is as a person! God knows that it is the Spirit stirring in the human heart that yields competence, energy, and even greatness. God who looks on our hearts knows wherein we can shine. Paul teaches that each one of us, even a man born blind, is a child of light. He *is* light, Paul says. The man is told to wash as we are washed in baptism and he can see, and so can we. God perceives in each of us the potential to grow in understanding. “One thing I know,” the man says, “that though I was blind, now I see.” In Samuel, God sees the ability to wait; in David, a right heart; in the blind man, light; in Jesus, the embodiment of God’s healing compassion.

Next, what God sees, God finds. Certainly, God finds David. But watch what happens with the man born blind. He is an outsider to his community because of his blindness. Once healed one would expect acceptance. But he is driven out again because of Jesus' unorthodox healing. Once again the man born blind is all alone, and Jesus finds him. Where once he had healed the man's blindness, now he reaches out to heal the deeper hurts of rejection. We learn that Jesus does not desert us when things go against us. Jesus sees us and finds us. He understands us, and in the sense of support he stands under us. In good times and bad he is our companion. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus asks the man born blind. The man answers, "Lord, I believe."

Let me share a contemporary story that illustrates what I have been saying. A week and a half ago the violinist Itzhak Perlman was playing with the Philadelphia Orchestra. At the age of 4 Perlman contracted polio and lost the use of his legs. I can only imagine the feeling of being an outsider that would come to a boy unable to run with other children. After hearing its sound on the radio he began to study the violin. What did God see in him? Drive, joy, persistence, a love of the sound that a violin could make. If David found his harp, Itzhak discovered the violin. God found this young, lame child in Tel Aviv and accompanied him into most every concert hall in the world. Perlman as one might expect is an advocate for the disabled and is angered at the ridicule that pushes a person further away from healing community. At age 70 he said, "My goal is to not be bored by what I do." After his concert in Philadelphia the music critic noted, "In short, he wasn't bored..." He was awake, alive! On his motorized scooter he played Bach's *Violin Concerto No. 1*. The music must have been so transcendent that one could imagine a listener exclaiming afterwards like the blind man, "I believe."

We don't all have to be an Itzhak Perlman. But there are occasions when we feel ourselves to be on the outside. We may be in the hospital. We may feel alone in a crowded room. Our experience may have separated us from others. It is not a question of sin, or deserving whatever we are going through. I suppose it is the human condition. But God sees us – not the way we appear to ourselves or others. God sees our hearts, our goodness, the divine spark within us. And God's Spirit wants to blow upon that spark so that it bursts into flame.

What God sees, God finds. Jesus taught, “Not one sparrow will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matt. 10: 29). So don’t be afraid. God sees the real you. God has found you. God is with you. You are a child of light. And that, “I believe.”

Amen.