

## WHEN OUR STORY IS BIGGER THAN THE TEACHINGS

John 9:1-41 NRSV

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The story of the man born blind is also the story of people blinded by their own teachings. Again and again as Jesus' encounter with the blind man unfolds, we see that his literal blindness is paralleled by the spiritual blindness of many in his faith community. The story invites us to ask what in our own teachings, our own doctrines, our own understandings or practices of faith, may be precisely what prevents instead of allows our seeing God.

Before pursuing that question, let's look more closely at the story. The first blindness we encounter is that of the man. As Jesus was walking, we learn, he sees this "man blind from birth."

Immediately we're told of a second blindness, which is that of the disciples. When they see the man, they ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, the man or his parents, that he was born blind?" What blinds the disciples is their belief, an orthodoxy of their day, that sin must be the cause of any such affliction.

Then as soon as Jesus heals the blind man, we meet a third type of blind person, this time the religious leaders. What they see is that lots of their favorite teachings or practices have been violated. They see that a man who had to have sinned, otherwise he couldn't have been blind, is involved in a miracle. This can't be right. They see that the miracle has been done on the sabbath. This has to be wrong.

Since they can find no way to make all this hang together, they decide the man couldn't have been blind in the first place. Aiming to confirm that it's all a hoax, they ask the man's neighbors and then parents.

The parents don't have a clue what's going on. But at least they dare to see that something has really happened, rather than trying, with the religious leaders, to change reality itself to fit their beliefs. This is what they say: "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened

his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."

They are also, the text explains, just plain protecting themselves. This is a time when if people disagree with the leaders, if they claim to have found a way to salvation different than the leaders insist on, they can quickly find themselves excommunicated. So the cautious parents do their best both to tell the truth about their son and to avoid telling it in such a way as to inflame the leaders.

Of all the people in the story, the parents are probably most like many of us. Many of us just kind of muddle along, just try to get along, just try to avoid lying about what we see or telling the truth about it so boldly that we get in trouble. We're not the religious leaders, who care more about their doctrines than about the real sufferings and miracles of real life and so shut their eyes when something challenges their pet views.

But neither are we the blind man, the only one so aware of being blind that he truly longs to see. After Jesus had finished saying he was the light of the world, "he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes."

We'd probably flinch from the down-and-dirty treatment, the paste of spit and dirt, the blind man accepts to find healing. But this is what Jesus does, in an act hinting at God's creating of humans from the dust, and the blind man obeys when Jesus orders, "'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means sent).'" Then he went and washed and came back able to see."

His neighbors and acquaintances can't make heads nor tails of this, any more than could we. Imagine our reaction if someone we knew to be blind showed up seeing, then claimed it was the doing of this guy who rubbed on spit and mud.

The religious leaders step in to straighten everything out, to make clear that this man's story must be wrong. They practically torture him into recanting. Listen as they order him to turn against Jesus:

"Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I

was blind, now I see.” They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen.”

What stands out here is the contrast between two approaches. The leaders make reality fit the truth they think they already know. Their doctrines become for them more important than real life.

The man has no clear doctrine anymore. He’s mostly mystified. He can’t fathom what has happened to him. He can’t even be sure whether Jesus is or isn’t a sinner. He’s sure of only two things: first, once he was blind but now he can see. Second, he was healed by this man Jesus.

Now eventually his being sure of these two things leads him to affirm even more. Seeing is good; Jesus has done this good thing. How could he have done this good thing if he wasn’t from God? Therefore he must be from God and not a sinner.

Imagine the impudence. Born blind and a beggar. Now he dares to share the insights his experience has given him. The leaders will have none of it. ““You were born entirely in sin, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.”

Notice that right to the end nothing gets through to the leaders. They don’t care if God himself comes down and tells them they’re blind. If he does, it’s clear who’s wrong: God just doesn’t get it. What’s startling is to realize that according to John, this is what has just happened. God himself has come through Jesus and the leaders have preferred to think themselves rather than God the true seers.

Now in another time, in relation to another text, I’d preach the need for accountability to truths larger than our own, to teachings of the church, and against relying only on personal experience. In our individualistic era that sermon is often one we urgently need. Yet this particular text pulls me and us, I believe, another direction. This story alerts us to the dangers of loving our community’s doctrines even when they go against our personal experience.

This text invites us at least for today to stop being the timid parents who

see that something big has happened to their son but who aren’t about to say so much it gets them kicked out. This account gives us permission to be the son—and to ask where the doctrines are blind and where our life experiences give us eyes to see.

If I dare be a seminary dean for a moment, I’m reminded here of the fact that as dean I’ve developed several leadership themes, areas of emphasis it may be productive for me to keep in view at EMS in times ahead. One theme I’ve called “transforming the shadows” and described as—

fostering through the content of studies and the spirit within which seminary life unfolds a fierce love for the church able to celebrate that the church is the real body of Christ and also is ever shadowed by failures and fallibilities; shadows named rather than suppressed can become, through the saving grace of God in Christ, sources of transformation grounded in authenticity rather than causing unacknowledged subversion of stated values and commitments (Luke 7:36-50).

For me, transforming the shadows includes seeing life as it really is, whether it fits our teachings or not, rather than being so committed to this or that teaching that we can only see what’s there if it fits the teaching and just plain can’t even see reality if to see it would clash with doctrines we may love more than truth itself.

So think about it. In what messy, spit-and-mud ways have you and I found healing we wouldn’t dare share in church? When we hear anyone including me preach, what things do we hear that are just too shiny, too pious, too far removed from our own mucked-up way of being touched by Jesus to ring true?

We do all have blind spots; none of us can see raw reality without bending it one way or another. So we do all need the church to help us perceive what we can’t see for ourselves. There is a time to submit to the gathered community’s larger vision. But this story warns us that religious leaders then or now, seminary deans not least, can get it just plain wrong, even willfully and horrifyingly wrong.

So how do the leaders and their followers risk having it wrong now?

What do you see that they, that I, don't see? What do you see that the church doesn't see? For today trust your own sight, not only the church's, and see what you see. Then, in whatever ways God calls you to, come back. Even if it doesn't fit the church's usual understandings, come back to report how you've seen Jesus and what Jesus, the son of God, has done for you.