

**SermonBytes: Trapped in an old way of seeing**  
**John 9:1-38**

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One of the things that I have been mulling about as July the first approaches is that old question of "What next?". Sure, I will revert to my go-to position of gardening, golfing, genealogy, gastronomy, grandchildren, and good books. But what should I look to as far as the church is concerned? Not only has it been my home for all my life - she has been my great passion professionally for almost 40 years.

One of the things about being human is that we always try and find a comfort zone. And that usually has to do with history and what we know. And that we find it hard to change.

In 1876, the world's most advanced communications technology was the Telegraph. Western Union had a monopoly on the telegraph. It had \$41 million in bank and the pocketbooks of the financial world behind it. That year William Orton of Western Union was approached by Gardiner Hubbard, with an offer to sell the patent for a new invention for \$100,000! Orton laughed him out of the office and sent a letter to the inventor.

"Mr. Bell," he wrote, "after careful consideration of your invention, while it is a very interesting novelty, we have come to the conclusion that it has no commercial possibilities...What use could this company make of an electrical toy?". What he was talking about was of course the telephone. The telephone would have been perfect for Western Union. The company had a nationwide network of telegraph wires in place and Bell had shown that his telephone worked quite well on telegraph lines. All the company had to do was hook telephones up to its existing lines and it would have had the world's first nationwide telephone network in a matter of months. Instead, Bell took the patent and turned it into American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T), and in a few years it became the largest corporation in America. The Bell patent - offered to Orton for a measly \$100,000 - became the single most valuable patent in history.

Our Lenten journey in Year A brings us to yet another encounter story - the final one in the middle three weeks of the journey. The first was one of Jesus meeting Nicodemus, a man of power and courage and understanding, who yet could not bring himself to see the man he was talking to, or to understand his message. The second was the Meeting of the Samaritan woman at the well of Abraham outside of Sychar, where an outsider - a woman - grasps who Jesus is; something that his own disciples are struggling with. And she becomes the first person named by John who sees Jesus, who hears Jesus, who believes and who tells others. In doing so she becomes the first evangelist.

Our encounter today happens on the outskirts of Jerusalem, where a blind man meets Jesus, accepts his gift, and tells others of what he has received. In effect, he becomes the second evangelist named by John. But he - as Jesus himself will do - runs afoul of the Pharisees and the Leaders of the Temple. I hate the beginning of this story, because there is first of all the labeling - the man born blind. The label is used 18 times in this passage and then the sarcastic labeling that his affliction is a result of sin. It was

a commonplace understanding of illness in Jesus day. If someone was ill or disabled – someone had sinned.

It is only as the story carries on that we get to really see the man, to grasp his character, to understand his gratitude and his willingness to give credit where credit was due.

Jesus soon dispels the clumsy attempts to label, but also runs afoul of those who throw the “s” word around and of those who name him a sinner for healing on the Sabbath (which also by the way, implies that the man who was healed – was a sinner also in that he did what Jesus said and he was healed).

And so we have here bracketed side by side these two attitudes to Jesus: rule breaker; sinner; cast out by God on one hand; on the other faith healer, Son of God. Is he light or the darkness; knowledge or betrayal; judgment or grace? It depends on how you choose to look at it. It depends on what you believe.

For the Pharisees, the powers that be, and the scientifically curious, explanations must be found. It is a part of our makeup – we must explain, we must make sense of things. The urge is always in us. In the face of tragedy we ask ‘why?’, even though it is not usually the most helpful question. In response to ignorance we quest to know. In confusion we seek clarity of cause and solution. The urge to explain is powerful – but it is not always the solution we imagine it to be.

Some understanding or knowledge which John refers to 14 times in this passage comes not from our explanations but from elsewhere: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world yet the world did not know him” (John 1.9-10).

As that modern writer, Lesslie Newbigin, put it, “The only thing which can ‘make sense’ of a dark world is the coming of light, and that light does not come from below but from above, not from the past but from the future.” The demand for explanation in this story is fuelled by opposition to Jesus. They err in their demand, failing to recognize anything new. Their error leaves them stranded in darkness. In contrast, the one who was formerly in the dark, receives the light. ‘Lord, I believe,’ he says, and he worshipped him.

For the man, it is not an issue of explanation, but the reality of receiving and recognizing. He receives physical sight, but he also receives insight. It doesn’t come easily. He must face hostility and hard questioning. His faith isn’t a precondition but something that comes to him in the acknowledgement of his changed circumstances but faith is always about darkness and light. Those who claim to be in the know belittle the man, perhaps falling prey to the stereotype, of his former position.

For the man it’s not explanation, but experience, reception and recognition and belief – “You are the Christ”. Those who ERR – demanding explanation, refusing reception or recognition are the opponents of Jesus. In the story they are termed ‘Pharisees’ or ‘Jews’ but they actually represent us all. Whenever we are tempted to use the wisdom

of the world, to confine and explain away the presence of God, at the end it's the opponents of Jesus who are all in the dark, whereas the man previously in the dark has new sight.

It is too easy to reduce people to a single dimension. In this story, it's really hard for the people around the man who received his sight – as John calls him in v. 18 – to adjust to his new reality or see him for anything more than what he used to be. And so some folks don't recognize him at all. Others, including his parents, know what he struggled with and see his transformation but aren't sure what to make of it.

The two exceptions to this pattern of being trapped in designations reflecting the past are, first, the man himself and, second, Jesus. The man who sees can only rejoice in his recovery and looks ahead to an open future that probably exceeds anything he had previously imagined. How else, I wonder, could he engage the religious authorities who have intimidated others (including his parents) with such good humor: "Do you, also, want to become his disciples?" Indeed, there is a certain joyfulness to his portions of dialogue that is easy to miss if we understand him only as "the man born blind." Consider the brave playfulness of his retorts to the authority: "I do not know if he was a sinner. All I do know, is that though I was blind, now I see" (v. 25) Or, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (30-33).

Jesus also looks to the future rather than the past, inviting this man to faith and encouraging him by not just taking his question seriously but by revealing himself to him. Indeed, the play on "you have seen him" is simultaneously poignant and joyful. All of this leads the man who now sees to make the quintessential confession in John's Gospel: "Lord, I believe."

Today is one of those days that we as people of faith are invited to take stock of our past – the good, the difficult, the encouraging, the challenging – and ask what we need to let go, to receive the open future God has prepared for us. What designations no longer serve? How we have limited ourselves by seeing ourselves as victims, as helpless? And how we might open ourselves to the future that Jesus' grace and forgiveness and resurrection provide?

This is not at all to deny the importance of the past or to diminish some of the scars (or for that matter triumphs) we carry forward. But the way forward is into the future. A wise man once said there's good reason that the windshield of a car is so big and the rear-view mirror relatively small: because while it's good to be able to glance back once in a while, the key to getting where you need to go is looking forward.

The good news of the Gospel is calling us forward.