

Seeing and Believing by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. L4050306
Ephesians 5:8-14 and John 9:1-14, 6 March, 2005

It would be bad enough to have to go through life without sense of sight, but the story of Jesus' healing the blind man took place long before there were seeing-eye dogs, Braille elevator signs, or red and white-striped canes. Perhaps you have played the blindfold game of Pin the Tail on the Donkey, and been totally disoriented. Perhaps you have stumbled through a dark living room at night during a power outage and clobbered your shin on a coffee table.

To be blind in Jesus' day was worse: it was no game. It was no temporary condition. It was to be totally dependent upon others your whole life long. To be blind in Jesus' day was worse than that. Blindness was believed to be a punishment from God. A blind person was considered to be a sinner. If one was born blind, and presumably innocent, then, it was reasoned, a parent must have sinned to cause the blindness. If you were blind you were dependent on others and, you knew you were a sinner.

The only mercy we can find in the story of the man born blind is that he never knew what it was like to see. He didn't realize a loss of sight. He did not miss the red of the poppies on the hillside. He knew nothing of the blue of the Sea of Galilee or the browns and reds of the Judean hills.

The religious people said there was a reason that the man was born blind. His blindness was due to his parents' sins. After he was healed, these people were in denial: "This isn't the blind man, but is someone like him."

The people who knew this blind man were just like us. We humans look for order in the universe. We want to have a reason. There has to be a reason for a person to suffer cancer or Lou Gehrig's disease. It must be caused by a virus or by genetic conditions. There has to be a reason for macular degeneration of the eye. It must be caused by aging. There has to be a reason for AIDS. It must be the result of sinful behavior.

Jesus said the reason the man was born blind was not due to sins either of the man or of his parents. Jesus said the reason was so God's works could be revealed in him. If I were the one born blind, that reason would not give me any more comfort than to think that my parents had sinned. In the midst of my stumbling through darkness, my tendency would be to curse God for my blindness, not think about how God would be glorified.

Jesus meant, however, that by healing the blind man, people would see that God's power was within him. God would be glorified. It didn't matter how the blind man became blind, God's power could make him see.

There doesn't have to be a reason for everything that happens. When we are so pre-occupied with discovering the reason for occurrences, it is easy to distort reality. Ptolemy, the ancient Egyptian mathematician, developed all kinds of reasons for the moon and stars to travel their various courses through the night sky, reasons which supported the earth as the center of the universe. It wasn't until Copernicus moved the center of the solar system to the sun that astronomy started making sense.

Human pre-occupation with reasons contributed to sin as the explanation for human suffering. If there was sadness or illness, someone must have committed a sin. The Biblical book of Job is the brilliant defense of a righteous man. Job argued that he committed no sin, and therefore did not deserve to suffer the loss of family, wealth, land, and health. And God said he was right: he didn't deserve the suffering. It was not caused by sin.

The Pharisees were preoccupied with sin. They dismissed the blind-and-healed man because he was a sinner. You heard those ominous words at the end of the scripture reading: “Now it was the Sabbath.”¹ No one is permitted to do any work on the Sabbath, according to the law by which they lived. Healing was work. Kneading the mud was prohibited on the Sabbath. So, the Pharisees called Jesus a sinner because he healed on the Sabbath. Once they called him a sinner, they could disregard anything he had to say: They could even deny that he had a right to live.

I have no question that sin often produces pain and suffering. Sin--our separation from God and God’s laws, and our separation from one another--causes heartache. The sin of adultery often leads to the break-up of families. The sin of greed often leads to poverty and hunger.

We do not have to stumble through life giving in to sin and causing hardship. There is Grace. Grace is divine love and protection bestowed freely on people. It is a freely-given gift from God. God “leads me beside still waters; God restores my soul.”² This is Grace!

While the Pharisees were preoccupied with sin, Jesus was preoccupied with grace. Humans condemn, God heals. In the healing, God is glorified.

How do we condemn? I could think of some things to say about people who don’t go to worship on Sundays. They are sinners. How can they do any good? Yet, they are just as capable of raising money for relief of tsunami victims and have. God can use people who don’t go to church to deliver grace.

Society is quick to condemn gays and lesbians. I mention them because this is one of the most painful issues for churches to deal with today. They are to us what Gentiles, Samaritans, blind beggars, and lepers were to Jesus’ listeners. We in our pietistic shelters, can be quick to condemn. Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and the Christian right are masters at such condemnation. They say, “Gays and lesbians are sinners.” “How can they do any good?” Yet, gays and lesbians can be just as compassionate, just as monogamous, just as God-loving, yes, just as Christian as straight church-goers. They need to be given our grace, not our condemnation.

While we humans can be preoccupied with sin, Jesus is preoccupied with grace. It is in the healing, in acts of kindness and love that God is glorified. In this story of the blind man, Jesus, and the Pharisees, an interesting thing occurs. As the healed formerly-blind man moves closer to seeing Jesus as Messiah, the “sighted” pharisees move farther from Jesus. Read the rest of the story in Chapter Nine of John. The dialogue continues and at times is humorous, if not pathetic. The sinner receives grace while the religious condemn themselves.

In what ways are we blind to God’s grace just like the Pharisees? Remember, we’re the worshipers, the faithful people. We’re supposed to know about God, Jesus, and grace.

During this Lenten season, may we look deep into our hearts. In what ways do we sin? In what ways are we distant from God’s love and from other people? In what ways do we need healing? Then, let us pray that Jesus may touch us and heal us of our blindness. God in grace, can save us, can find us, and can transform our lives.

¹John 9:14

²Psalms 23:2