

For the people of St. Philip's
A Lent 4: March 2, 2008
John 9:1-41
Maria Hoecker, preacher

This is the fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A. as we continue our new encounter with the Revised Common Lectionary. As you may be starting to notice, the Gospel readings are long in this season of Lent. The Church continues its series of stories recalling close encounters of Jesus: starting with Nicodemus; last week, the woman at the well; today, the man born blind; and next week: Lazarus with his two sisters. Or to look at it another way, these are our Gospel "encounters" with our own searching, thirst, blindness and death.

So today we focus on our encounters with blindness. Do you know that I know a bit of what it feels like to be legally blind? When I take off my glasses, I can't see anything- really. I am legally blind. It affects my life in a myriad of ways. In fact, lately I've been giving some serious thought to getting lasik eye surgery so that I could be freed from my complete dependence on glasses.

Although we do not realize it most of the time, our ability to see is partly a physical experience but it is also partly a mental exercise. In order to see, one must have also seen. The brain must see things in order to know what it is seeing. *

That's why blind people who surgically receive the ability to see cannot instantly begin to act like all those who can see. Without having had any prior experience with the experience of depth perception, the formerly blind find themselves reaching for objects that are actually well out-of-reach even as they may knock over a glass of water which is closer than they thought.

Some folks with new sight even continue to use their white canes for a while so that they can slowly begin to connect how the world has always *felt* through the tip of the cane with how it now *looks* through their eyeballs.

Seeing is something that some of us take for granted, but it is a bit more complex than we might think. Those of us who struggle with diminishing eyesight know that it is not something to take for granted.

John 9 bears witness to this same fact, albeit in a spiritual realm. In this long Gospel reading today irony is created through the fact that the man who had been blind turns out to have a sharper spiritual vision than people who think that they can see all. The Pharisees, who believe their vision can penetrate spiritual matters with Lasik laser-like precision, turn out to be the truly blind ones.

As I often remind myself, I tend to be a Pharisee on more days than not. There is a part of this story that pinches a bit. . John 9 counsels caution to those who, out of a sincere but misguided desire to show pious seriousness, say more about the sins of others than they actually know.

The Pharisees, through their dismissal of both Jesus and the healed man as lousy sinners, remind us that it is possible for the devout to use the "sin" label as a way to avoid encountering people--and in avoiding other people we perceive to be sinners --we learn from Jesus, that we are missing out on our own possible salvation from sin. It is in loving "the other" in our midst that we come to know the love of Jesus, which saves us all.

In this Gospel lesson there is a very broad hint that sometimes the very people who talk the most about sin (*other people's* sin, that is) are themselves the most blind, sinful folks of all. I'm am convicted of that sin each and every day, I'm ashamed to admit.

In this season of Lent I've been contemplating grace. God's extravagantly abundant grace. What is the difference between grace and luck? They are very different you know. One can experience abundant grace and yet be plagued by the worst luck. Grace saves us from our sins, and by the way, we all sin. Some of us have good luck, some of us don't. Usually folks having a spell of good luck start to think that God is granting them special graces, "we are blessed" they say demurely. But that's not Grace with a capital G. That's just luck. Too much good luck starts to blind us. Being blind to our own sin can make us so blind to our own need for grace that we become stingy in doling out this same grace to those around us.

If the gospel contains good news, it is that by God's grace, none of us get what we deserve. We receive far more than we deserve. Not one of us earns our grace points. That's the difference between luck and grace. Luck comes and goes. Grace is constant. Luck lulls us into falsely believing that we are the sole cause and effect for what happens in our lives. Grace sustains us when we begin to fear that perhaps we are having a spell of bad luck. Grace opens our eyes to the love of Jesus Christ.

That's why grace is such amazingly good news---not just good news for those *other* people--- it is good news for me, and for you.

(Hymnal #671)

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, twas blind but now I see.

Through many dangers toils and snares I have already come. 'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

(* thoughts on blindness "The Gift of Sight" by Scott Hoezee)