

“Mad At Grace” – John 9:1-41 – Lent 4, Apr 3, 2011

Last week we saw how looking at a selection from John’s gospel as though it were a movie helped to understand what was being said. And while I don’t want to overuse the technique it seems pretty clear that it would be helpful to take the same approach today.

Once again we have just heard a marvelous drama from John’s gospel. On the surface it is an endearing story, but we tend to come away with a misunderstanding of just what happened and more importantly of what it was all about. We tend to think, “oh yeah, a blind man was healed, and Jesus is shown to be the powerful good guy.”

Let’s step back, try to clear our heads of preconceptions about this incident, and begin by looking at how the drama is structured so we can recognize the powerful statement about faith. Recall that before these events took place, Jesus spoke to the people in the Temple, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” On that occasion the Pharisees didn’t get into it – they simply dismissed Jesus and his claim, declaring that his testimony was not valid because he was testifying on his own behalf. Now in this episode that controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees deepens, and leads ominously to his third prediction of his coming death.

It also helps to recognize that John carefully crafted his description of this miraculous event into a drama set in four scenes – this is where the analogy to a movie comes in. Although the other players change from scene to scene, the blind man provides a continuous thread through the entire episode – the blind man and Jesus, the blind man and his community, the blind man and the church, and then the blind man and Jesus again.

In the opening scene Jesus walks along accompanied by his disciples and they encounter a man blind from birth. His disciples, ever the eager students willing to demonstrate they had been paying attention to his teaching, try to put a theological spin on the man’s blindness and ask if the man’s blindness is his fault, or his parents’. The poor disciples really aren’t portrayed in the best of light in the gospels, are they? After all, there is some kind of logic behind asking whether the man’s blindness was due to the parents’ sin. However, since the man was blind from birth it doesn’t make much sense to ask if he was blind because of his own sin. I don’t think even the toughest Pharisee would have argued that the child in the womb was capable of sinning, so it’s not the brightest of questions. Jesus dismisses their query and declares that he was blind so that God’s work might be revealed in him.

Now, at this the blind man could surely be excused for asking, “why are you picking on me?” Surely he deserves sainthood, or at least some kind of bonus in heaven. Born blind that he might reveal God’s work is at best kind of a double-edged honour, and it gets worse for him as the drama plays out. In any event, here in Scene 1 Jesus heals him, restores his sight, and then leaves the story.

You would think that those who knew the man would be happy for him, wouldn’t you? You would think that they would rejoice with him, and share his excitement at being able to see for the first time all that they were used to seeing. But no, they’re upset that he’s healed. “It can’t be him”, some protest. “How can this be?”, they question him over and over, refusing to believe in the miracle. “Who did this?”, they demand, and press him to discover who this Jesus is who did it. “He didn’t!” “Did too!” It’s like a schoolyard scrap, or a Presbytery meeting, and not a very happy picture ... no joy, no praise, no giving thanks to God, no encouragement, no celebration; nothing but contentious questions, arguments and quarreling. And so the people, mad at grace displayed and unhappy at his being healed, haul the poor fellow off to those pillars of righteousness and un-forgiveness, the Pharisees.

The tension now escalates, because the healing miracle by Jesus was apparently illegal, taking place on the Sabbath and thus violating the rigid rules concerning work on that day. Some of the Pharisees declared the one who did it could not possibly be from God, because he was obviously a sinner who broke the Sabbath rules. But others began to recognize the trap into which their rigid rules were pushing them - if he was a sinner, he could not have done this; but he did it, so how could he be a sinner? The obvious conclusion is too difficult for them to accept. Scene 2 ends with them going back to the healed man and seeking his opinion, but they get another answer they're not happy with: "he is a prophet", the healed man declares with truthful simplicity.

The third scene seems to mostly take place in an interrogation room. With mounting frustration, the Pharisees probe a different angle. "Perhaps it was an illusion, and he wasn't blind at all." "Perhaps this only looks like the man, let's get his parents in here for questioning!" But the parents want nothing to do with any of this. Apart from confirming that yes, this is their son, and yes, he was born blind, they toss it right back. "Don't ask us, ask him, he's of age" they tell the Pharisees. In a brief interlude we see the now-healed man feeling very much beat up and alone. His neighbours have argued with him, and hustled him to the religious 'cop shop'. His parents have dropped him like a hot poker. Even the one who started all this by healing him is nowhere around. Things are not looking good. How could it get worse?

Well, it could, and does get worse, because now he is hauled in for interrogation a second time. Losing patience, the Pharisees get right feisty, and charge the man to come clean, give glory to God, and agree that the man who healed him was a sinner. By now, pretty much abandoned by everyone, the once-blind but now-healed man gets rather feisty himself. "I've told you over and over! Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" And in the heat of the argument the healed man points out with force and great clarity how the healing itself is final proof that this Jesus is truly from God. Now this is the moment that we all recognize ... that moment when a silent chill descends over the room, and the Pharisees get really quiet, and serious, and he knows he has pushed it too far. It's that heart-stopping moment when you realize that with what you have blurted out you have just proved to your boss, or your parents, or your professor, or the judge that they are wrong.

The reaction of the Pharisees is totally predictable ... they drive him out. Now the healed man is not only alone, abandoned by his neighbours and by his family, but now he is excommunicated as well! Gone is his predictable lifestyle, limited though it may have been. Gone are his daily routines, and the tolerant if not friendly exchanges with those who used to drop coins in his begging cup. He has been banished, no longer permitted even to enter the Temple to find comfort in worship. And he never asked for any of it!! As Scene 3 ends, the curtain closes upon a man shunned and rejected, all because of the gift of sight given to him by this strange and controversial Jesus.

At this point, just when things are the lowest, Jesus returns, and in the concluding scene hears the simple yet all-powerful confession of the healed man, "Lord, I believe." Jesus also makes the declaration that is the underlying point of the entire drama: "I have come into the world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Once again we hear that profound and disturbing message of the gospel, an upside-down, inside-out, not-the-way-you-think-it-works good news of God's saving action in Jesus.

While we may not have been involved in or witnessed such a miracle, we can still identify with the people who were involved, can't we? Perhaps we might recognize the crowd, the neighbours, upset at someone in our midst being touched with God's grace? People aren't

always (or even often) happy with other people's successes. There are lots of times when people are less than overjoyed at seeing someone else blessed by grace, especially if they think it's not deserved. One uncomfortable message here is that God's grace is offered by His rules, and His terms, not ours, and to people who we might not think deserve it. The crowd needs to see that instances of God's grace for others are cause for celebration, and thanksgiving, and praise.

And the Pharisees? Nobody likes to be identified with them, and people use their own blindness to keep from seeing the connection. "How can this act of grace be?", they demand, if only silently. "God can't be acting outside of the rules", they protest, whatever the rules they have established may be. And people are exceedingly clever and subtle about these rules they invent and follow. Take for example, "God won't respond to me, because I don't pray faithfully enough." Or how about, "God can't love me, because I don't believe properly". Oh yes, even we can definitely be associated with the Pharisees in the story, even if our rigidity is against ourselves and not others.

Possibly we can also recognize people who are like the parents in the story, people who don't want to get involved in change, who want to preserve their secure and comfortable relationship within the church institution. Or people who are like the disciples in this story? That's also not a flattering association, for the disciples here seem to do little other than to stir the pot at the beginning, and then fade into the background as the crisis they triggered deepens.

I think we can most easily relate to the blind man, though, as he is the key character and model for us. At some point in our lives we are touched by Jesus, even when we haven't been actively seeking. This is perhaps one of the most profound details of this story, and indeed of our stories, that Jesus comes to us first, bringing to us the healing contact of God's love in his Son, opening our eyes and forcing us to see the world around us. Just like for the man in the gospel, not all that we see around us in life, in our neighbours, in our families, in our churches is pretty, or comforting, or welcoming, or accepting. Much of what we can see with the sight Jesus gives to us is quarreling, disbelief, non-involved neutrality, or condemnation by those who claim to see. But much of it is beautiful as well; the splendour of God's creation, sunrises and sunsets, clouds and flowers, the kindness of friends and strangers alike. With God's grace we can see the beauty of God's love at work in others who have been touched, and who live in the light of Christ.

The final insight about the man who was healed defines a close association and parallel for us as well. We are left to wonder and to speculate about what happened to the man after this momentous episode in his life. What was life like for him as he adjusted to having to learn a trade to make a living, now that he had no legitimate reason to sit and beg? Did he reconcile with his parents? Was he tormented by being able to see the Jesus who had given him sight executed on the cross? Was he one of the people privileged to see the risen Christ? Did he become part of an early Christian congregation?

So many questions, so much uncertainty. It's the same for us. We don't know, we can't see, what lies ahead for any of us. But we can note that Jesus returned to the healed man when he heard that he had been rejected, driven out, and reassured him with the knowledge that he had indeed been touched, and healed by the Son of Man. Like that healed man we also are comforted by the risen and returned Jesus, the light of eternal life, illuminating the path and leading us into the Father's kingdom.