

The Rev. Judith A. Sullivan

Lent IV A

John 9: 1-41

Three or four years ago, in a movie called “What the Bleep Do We Know Anyway?” which is about quantum physics and human perception, a scientist related this story: The indigenous peoples who inhabited the Caribbean islands could not see Columbus’ armada advancing at the horizon line because the ships were not like anything that they had ever seen or known before. The tribal shaman noticed ripples in the water and looked every day to see what was causing them. Eventually, he was able to see the ships and told the others. The tribe believed the shaman and because they trusted him, they were finally able to see the ships, too.

The scientist explained the phenomenon this way: We human beings only see what we already believe is possible and what conforms to existing patterns in our brains. Our eyes, which are like neutral lenses, may physically record billions of bits of information per second, but the visual cortex in our brains actually “sees” a tiny percentage of them. That relatively tiny percentage of information which will make sense to us according to our biases and will confirm our preconceived assumptions about how the world really works. It seems, according to the physicists in this film, that we are creatures who selectively interpret raw data as evidence to support our own reality. A reality shaped by the often unconscious paradigms, or models, by which we live.

And we can’t seem to help it. Think, for example, of those who opposed Galileo and fiercely clung to the notion that the world was flat. After all, that was all that they could see. Or of those who have resisted antibiotics, preferring instead the old ways they knew to treat the microscopic disease that they did not understand and could not see. Or of those who have resisted time saving, technological innovations of all kinds based on wave technology that we can’t see—No, no, that probably includes everyone of us here over the age of eighteen--Think of those who simply cannot see and will not accept the merits of propositions and assumptions which are patently and painfully obvious to us. Think of these people and you have the recipe for colliding worldviews and clashing paradigms.

And let’s be clear. From the outset of this Gospel story, Jesus goes out of his way to challenge the prevailing world views and assumptions of the day. He is setting the new paradigm, his vision of the Kingdom of God, on the horizon line for all to see. There can be no doubt that he is inviting confrontation and that opposition to him among the Temple authorities is growing. Just prior to this story in John’s Gospel, Jesus is stoned in the Temple, hides himself, and slips out unseen.

It may seem a random event when he and his disciples encounter the man who is blind from birth. But it is one more occasion for him to “work the works of the one who sent [him].” “Rabbi,” the disciples ask, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus quickly disputes the widespread belief held in antiquity that infirmity occurred as the result of generational sin, that it was a deserved punishment from God. While this blind man may have been encountered randomly, Jesus could probably not have walked along very far without meeting many blind and infirmed persons who were shunned because of their alleged sinfulness, and who were then discarded to sit and beg at the side of roads or pools. In a precursor to his own crucifixion, Jesus explains that the man “was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” It is a shattering paradigm shift, and still is, to consider that God and God’s purposes are often revealed in and to those who are powerless and wounded, as they were revealed in Jesus and the blind man.

And if it were not enough to heal this untouchable man using materials as base as mud and spittle when he didn’t even ask for healing, Jesus throws down the gauntlet with the Pharisees by performing it on the Sabbath. A fact which John seems to slip in incidentally a bit later. Like the Caribbean people who could not see Columbus’ ships as they advanced at the horizon line, for the Pharisees, this simply does not compute. Their worldview—their assumptions, their prejudices, as well as their ideals—will not permit their minds to grasp the significance of what has happened as a reality. This Jesus is not like anyone they have known or seen before and breaking the Sabbath is an unthinkable breach of a dearly held paradigm, the law and the Ten Commandments as they have interpreted them. How could anything good could come from it, even healing?

Systematically, the Pharisees do their best to discredit the evidence and the testimony by asking a lot of questions. Surely, they reason, anyone who would do this on the Sabbath must be a sinner. But could a sinner perform such a sign? Better to deny the miracle altogether—maybe this man was not really born blind? Has the blind man who has been disfavored by God in his infirmity and born into sin misunderstood Jesus’ actions? When the blind man repeats his testimony, the Pharisees grow increasingly adamant in their own assertions. They claim to know that Jesus is a sinner; they know that God has spoken to Moses but they do not know where this man, Jesus, comes from. By contrast, the formerly blind man is more circumspect about what he claims to know: “I do not know whether he is a sinner,” he says. “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” As this man retells his tale to his neighbors and then again to the Pharisees, his physical sight parallels an evolution of metaphorical sight into the spiritual truth. After a time, he can see who Jesus is. He first describes him as a prophet, then as a man from God, and ultimately, proclaims him to be the Messiah when he finally meets him face to face. The Pharisees, in all their arrogant certainty about what they see and know, are becoming more and more blind, moving further and further from the revelation of God.

Speaking in defense of these Pharisees for a moment, it's hard to be the keeper of the traditions. Hard to know when to give way to a new paradigm, a new way of seeing and believing and relating to God. Like the Pharisees, most of us hold on very hard to what we think we know, to the reality of our lives which has been shaped by our families and experiences, by education and important institutions, relationships, ideas, and ideals. Surely this is very human and it is often admirable and honorable. The difficulty arises when our certainty about what we think we know prevents us from encountering the living God. When rigidity and fear prevent us from accepting God doing something new in our lives.

Each one of us has literal blind spots which parallel places of spiritual blindness. But if as the scientist claims, we see only what we already believe is possible, then we remember and trust that with God, all things are possible. We remember and trust that when we choose to follow Jesus that God will act in ways which surprise and challenge our worldview and our most basic assumptions. We remember and trust that sometimes we will have to let go of our certainty a bit and enter into the mystery of God who defies all human categories and definitions.

In our lifetimes, we will never do this perfectly, but we might do it humbly. As Paul tells us in the first letter to the Corinthians, "for now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now [we] know only in part; then [we] will know fully, even as [we] have been fully known." With our incomplete sight, let's continue to look for the ripples that signal God's activity in the world. Let's point them out to one another until we can see the new revelation of God on our horizon line. Better yet, let's get in the water and be a part of God's new wave. Let's make a few ripples ourselves. AMEN

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