

26 March Lent 4 : John 9.1-41

Some things I have seen this week are bright yellow sunflowers, misty rain, seedpods and unripe fruit, people in distress, two people planning to wed, someone dying and wondering what he did wrong, a purple candle accompanying prayer, tiny children dancing. What about you? What do you see?

And, what do I know of this man who was healed from his blindness? Well, I know that he begins on the edge of the story. He is the object of a theological discussion, categorized, put in a box. Jesus notices him and Jesus moves him from object to subject. Jesus takes the things of the earth, dirt and spit, makes mud and invites him to wash. Only then does this man enter with a voice. He is questioned and unrecognised. But he speaks his truth and answers questions simply and clearly. He challenges without restraint. Then he gets to know Jesus. He, like the woman last week, becomes known and loved, and a new person. Jesus says categorically that his disability is not his fault.

It seems that Jesus is on about healing, about compassion, about light and love, and this includes challenging those at the centre of power, the legalists, the critics. His mission it seems to me is to bring healing and wholeness, to bring light and peace and love, and, a new boldness. But change and transformation bring disruption.

'After the man born blind receives his sight, even some of his own friends and neighbours don't recognise him, this in spite of his protests that he is, well, who he is - 'I am' he says.. Isn't that what God calls Godself? ! Isn't it odd, that people who knew him well as a blind man couldn't recognise him once he'd recovered his sight? Or maybe it isn't quite as odd as we think.

How often, I wonder, do we define those around us in terms of their shortcomings, challenges, or perceived deficits. That woman is unemployed, we may say, or this man is divorced. She's a single mum; He's a failure; she's an alcoholic. She has cancer. He's depressed.

Nor is this practice limited to others. We often do the same to ourselves, allowing past setbacks, disappointments, or failures to shape how we see ourselves. We seem to have such a thing for defining others -- and ourselves -- in terms of problems rather than possibilities that we aren't sure what to do when the situation changes. And so the friends of the man born blind have defined him -- and even their relationships with him -- so fully in terms of his disability that they can't recognise him when he regains his sight. We have learned to cope with our limitations even as we resent them.

When word of his transformation reaches the authorities and they, dissatisfied with his testimony, call his parents, even members of the man's own family distance themselves from him (verses 18-21). I think it offers a metaphor of how systems react to change.

Whether we're talking about a community, congregation, or family, when a system organises itself around a defined problem it has a difficult time moving toward health. Even unhappy and unhealthy systems tend to prefer a known problem to an unknown solution and so have a hard time letting go of the very things that are limiting them. A "problem child" leaves the home and another child begins acting up. A "confrontational member" moves away from the congregation and two others begin acting more confrontationally. The very systems we live in, when organised around problems, create new ones when old ones are alleviated because that's what they've become used to solving. And so the man's

parents, fearful of the consequences of their son's sight, play it safe by distancing themselves from their son.

The man who sees (notice how easy it is to label him and this whole story "the man born blind;" that is, in terms of his deficit) is eventually kicked out of the community (verse 34). So also in many of our own communities, the move toward healthy change and new identity is often sabotaged. In this story, the cost of acknowledging that this man was cured by Jesus -- that is, acknowledging that Jesus was sent by God -- was simply too great to those in authority, and so they deny it even happened and, when that fails, drive out the man who stands as living evidence to his own testimony.

One of the hallmarks of John's Gospel is that when Jesus arrives on the scene and in our lives, everything changes. Limitation falls by the wayside with the one who can turn water into wine. Divisions (and their corresponding ethnic definitions) between Samaritans and Jews fade away in the presence of the one who offers living water. And the one who can heal even a man born blind is the One who offers not just life, but life in all of its abundance.

When Jesus comes into our life, things change. That sounds good. Until we realise that change is always disruptive. And then we wonder whether the change -- even when it promises new life -- is worth it.
And yet just as Jesus sought out the man who sees and confirmed him in his healing, new identity, and abundant life (verse 35), so also will Jesus seek us out, rebuking all those who steal or limit our identity (even when we do it to ourselves!) and invite us to rich and abundant life.

When Jesus comes he changes things. And those changes can be hard. But, wow, they are also life giving. For what Jesus wants for us isn't just survival, persistence, getting by. No, what Jesus wants for us is life, full and rich and abundant. The kind of life that stems from knowing that we have infinite worth in God's eyes and are and always will be God's beloved child.

Transformation is always disruptive and, how often we will resist it.. when resistance comes, keep in mind that maybe, just maybe, given that we are following a crucified Messiah, that resistance itself offers a modicum of evidence that we're being faithful to our calling'.¹

HELP US TO SEE by Andrew King
(John 9: 1-41)
What would we see, Lord,
if you healed our blindness today?

Would we see you at work
in the ones we think to be sinful?

Would we see you at work
among the outcasts of the world?

¹ Much of this sermon and its ideas are from David Lose:
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3123>

Would we see your love
for the poor, the homeless, the hungry?

Would we see your compassion
for the weak, the helpless, the afraid?

Would we see you
in the stranger, the foreigner, the refugee?

Would we see your likeness – can we grasp it –
in each one of ourselves?

Help us to see, Lord. Heal our blindness today.²

Susanna

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