March 30, 2014 – 4th Sunday of Lent

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Today’s Gospel passage tells the story of the healing of the man who was born blind. It’s the second to the last of the seven miracles, or signs, as John calls them, in the Fourth Gospel. The others are:

1. [Changing water into wine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage_at_Cana) in [John 2:1-11](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_%28American_Standard%29/John#2:1)
2. [Healing the royal official's son](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Healing_the_royal_official%27s_son) in [Capernaum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capernaum) in [John 4:46-54](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_%28American_Standard%29/John#4:46)
3. [Healing the paralyzed man at Bethesda](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Healing_the_paralytic_at_Bethesda) in [John 5:1-18](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_%28American_Standard%29/John#5:1)
4. [Feeding the 5000](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feeding_the_5000) in [John 6:5-14](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_%28American_Standard%29/John#6:5)
5. [Jesus walking on water](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus%27_walk_on_water) in [John 6:16-24](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_%28American_Standard%29/John#6:16), and
6. [Raising of Lazarus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_of_Lazarus) in [John 11:1-45](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_%28American_Standard%29/John#11:1)

The number seven is a significant Biblical number, being the number that symbolizes completion or perfection, and it’s found throughout both the Old and New Testaments – seven days of creation, seven times seven years between Jubilee years, Pentecost is seven time seven days after Passover, or Easter in the case of Christianity, Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew telling us to forgive seventy times seven times, the seven seals in Revelation, and on and on.

So Jesus probably didn’t only perform only seven miracles, but John chose that number to signify something else, something much bigger – a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. But all that’s just to whet your appetite to study the Gospel of John.

One of the hallmarks of the signs in John’s Gospel is that the actual miracles themselves take place with little fanfare. Some of them happen without any physical contact by Jesus at all, and some of them, like today’s healing, take place off stage, out of sight. We are brought up to speed on what happened by the comments of the people affected, or those nearby. Because there is so much dialogue involved, these events take on a very human character, which makes them easy for us to enter into and relate to.

So here’s the scene. Jesus has been teaching in Jerusalem for awhile, and is strolling through the streets with his disciples in tow. They pass by a blind beggar sitting on the side of the road, where he has probably sat and begged for most of his life. The disciples have no interest in him except as a learning tool, and ask Jesus if it had been the blind man who had sinned, or his parents, the assumption being that his blindness must have been caused by sin of some kind. Jesus tells them that the man is blind not because of his own sin or that of his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him.

There are those who would interpret this to mean that God made this man blind, and then put him in the path of Jesus, but I don’t think that’s what happened here. I, personally, don’t believe that God sets up these kinds of situations in order to teach us a lesson.

The NRSV translation says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him,” but the words “he was born blind,” in that sentence don’t actually appear in the Greek. Some translators must have thought that it made the sentence clearer, but I think it adds an incorrect meaning where it’s meant to be intentionally vague.

So God’s off the hook – he didn’t make this guy blind from birth to prove a point several years later. I always thought that kind of thing made God look pretty petty and mean, anyway. Jesus then says, somewhat obscurely, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Once again he brings up the theme of light and darkness that John uses throughout his Gospel, especially referring to Jesus, himself. Then he spits in the dust, makes some mud, glops it on the guy’s eyes, and sends him offstage, to the Pool of Siloam to wash it off. Like the Samaritan woman from last week, he is sent away and comes back with a story to tell.

Also like the Samaritan woman’s story, there’s some wry humor here. The man comes back right away, able to see for the first time in his life. It doesn’t say he went home to change, or got his hair cut and his nails done or anything. He came right back, presumably looking pretty much the same as he did a little while before, only a little damper.

But some of his neighbors, who had no doubt seen him sitting in that same place probably for years, start to argue over whether it’s him or not. "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." Meanwhile, he’s saying, “I’m right HERE! I can hear you. I was blind, not deaf!”

So, they’re finally convinced it’s him, but now they want to know how it happened. “Well,” the former beggar says, “this guy, who I didn’t see because I was, you know, blind, put some mud on my eyes and told me to go wash it off, and now I’m not blind anymore. I think they called him Jesus.” “Well, where is he now?” they ask. “Dunno – formerly blind, remember? He’s not around here now.” he says. I can imagine that his newly opened eyes must have been rolling by this time.

So, apparently having nothing better to do, the neighbors haul him off to the Pharisees, who get in an argument about Jesus healing on the Sabbath, but finally get around to asking the man what he thought. By this time he’s had some time to ponder what had happened, and decides that Jesus is a prophet.

But the Pharisees aren’t listening and apparently decide that he never was blind to begin with, which neatly takes care of the problem of whether or not Jesus healed on the Sabbath. But just to be sure, they call in his parents, who confirm that he had been, in fact, blind from birth.

It starts to get a little more dramatic and a little less funny here. His parents were afraid because the Pharisees had said that anyone who said that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue, so they essentially threw their son under the bus and told the Pharisees that he could speak for himself. Then they presumably hightailed it back to their house, never to be heard from again.

A little historical note here – being put out of the synagogue might not necessarily have been that big of a deal in Jesus’ time, since the Temple was still standing and that was the center of Jewish worship. But the Gospel of John was written after the destruction of the Temple, so to John’s community, being thrown out of the synagogue, now the only places where Jews gathered to worship, was terrible. And in fact, the worst HAD happened to them already – by the time the Gospel was written they had been thrown out of the synagogues for believing that Jesus was the Messiah. The reference here would be like a punch in the stomach to them.

So the Pharisees bring the man back in to question him again, and the more they talk to him, the more convinced he is that Jesus is doing God’s work. The more they argue, the more he calmly answers each of their objections. ‘Why are you asking me all this again?” he asks, maybe a bit snarkily. “Do you want to become disciples, too?” Finally, they fall back on their orthodoxy and throw him out.

Jesus hears that he has been kicked out of the synagogue and tracks him down. “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” he asks him. “Who is he, Lord, that I might believe in him?’ the man answers. Remember, that he has never seen Jesus, but he might have recognized his voice because he calls him Lord. Or maybe his faith told him whom he was talking to. But Jesus sets his mind at ease and he worships him.

This is an amazing conversion story. This poor man, in the space of one day, gains his eyesight, loses his family, his community, such as it was, and religion of his birth, but finds his Messiah and his calling in life. It’s like living out of one of my favorite hymns:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found;

Was blind, but now I see.

This tale is full of blindness, and full of deafness, too. As the old saying goes, “There are none so blind as those who will not see.” But the saying goes on to say, “The most deluded people are those who choose to ignore what they already know.” The neighbors, the parents, the Pharisees, all put their hands over their ears saying, “La, la, la, I can’t HEAR you!” rather than believe what was right in front of them.

Because to truly see this man, and to truly listen to his witness, would mean overturning everything they had become comfortable with. This man’s blind so he must be sinful; therefore, it’s fitting that he should be a beggar – it’s all he’s good for. Or, this man can’t have been miraculously healed; therefore, it must be the work of a demon, because why would God heal him? Or, we wrote our son off years ago to keep people from think this was our fault; therefore, we can’t have anything to do with him now – we have our reputation to think of.

All of a sudden, this story is sounding very modern. Keep people in their place and don’t disturb the status quo, and then blame them for their lot in life. Or, throw out any religious expression or practice that doesn’t fit with a very narrow viewpoint, and then condemn those outsiders to a judgment of our own invention. Or, turn our backs on our friends or family members out of fear for our own interests, and then make excuses for our selfishness. There are examples of these in the newspapers and on the Internet on a daily basis.

You know what? It’s mean. It’s mean and it’s not how Jesus wants us to live our lives and be his disciples. Open your eyes, you blind people, and see me, the Son of Man, he’s telling us. And then look around and see, REALLY see your brothers and sisters.

Open your ears and listen to me, the Word. And then listen, REALLY listen to the cries of those in need all around you. Don’t shut your eyes. Don’t cover your ears. Open yourself up to all of God’s people, and love them, as I have loved you.

Sometimes it’s painful, this new vision, like going outside on a bright, sunny day. It’s easier just to keep our eyes shut and remain blind. But if we don’t open our eyes, we can’t see what’s around us, and if we can’t see, we can’t act. And act we must. With God’s help.

Amen.