

Restored

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Scholars say that this lesson from the Gospel according to John is one of the most seamlessly written pieces of narrative and theology in all of the New Testament. That's why we really needed to hear all forty one verses of it read today. It's nearly impossible, no matter how tempting, to pull out a verse here or there and wrap a whole sermon around it. This would do an injustice to the text, to its writer, and ultimately to you as the listener in this contemporary setting. John was a genius as a writer and communicator and you are intelligent listeners, so let's pick apart what he wrote for a few minutes and see if we can make some sense of it in this Lenten season. Contemporary scholars remind us that John's gospel is full of symbolism that cannot be taken literally or else we will lose the real essence of this amazing work.

For instance, John often refers to Jesus as the bread of life, but we know Jesus was not really bread. Likewise, Jesus is often called the water of life, but we know Jesus was not really water. And Jesus, though he is certainly the light of the world, did not really emanate light from his being, though there may have been a lightness to his life that we would do well to emulate. I suspect, and hope, you are with me to here. So now let us suppose that the story of the man born blind is equally full of symbolism and that we must be careful about taking it too literally. Frankly, I think we get more from it if we accept it's symbolic nature. At least one writer has suggested that the man born blind most truly symbolizes one who has always been unaware of what is most essential in life, that being a relationship with the living Spirit of God. So, when the disciples ask Jesus, "why was this man born blind," we are invited to hear the answer in a new way, "this man is unaware of the most essential things in life not because of anyone's fault, but so that God might come to him in new and exciting ways as the source of joy and abundance. The works of God will be displayed in him who is ignorant of the ways of God.

It begins to sound a bit like the last being first and the least being the greatest and the story starts to echo the themes of the gospels as we are most familiar with them. God, through the person of Jesus, will take what is lowest in the world and elevate it to a richness of spirit that we have only imagined. The man born blind symbolizes all who are lowest in the world as well as what is most broken, the lowest in us.

The good news of the Lenten season is that as we seek out new vision in the name of Jesus, the works of God are made known to us and displayed in us. We are elevated. We are invited to wholeness. We are invited to say, with that symbolic man, "Maybe I don't know Jesus as well as I might or as well as you think you do, but I do know that I was hurting and now I am healed I do know that I was broken and now I am whole, I was afraid and now I am comforted I was blind but now I see. Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

The other very visible characters in this biblical drama are the Pharisees. We might accuse them of nit-picking in this story. Instead of rejoicing with one who has found new life and new vision for daily living, they can only grouse about how he went about it 'in the wrong way' because it happened

on the Sabbath or was against the laws of the day, or was counter to their expectations about how someone should find new life. One person has suggested that 'an accomplished nit-picker can burst any celebratory balloon. "The wedding was so beautiful it's such a shame the groom couldn't have lost a few pounds for the occasion."

Do you know any nit-pickers? Someone who might say, "Hey, congratulations on the promotion. But you know, you've still got a long way to go till you're at the top of the ladder."

Or,

'wow, all the work we've done on the church sure looks nice. It's too bad the sanctuary is never full."

You see, that's what nit-pickers do best they let the air out of our joy. They blemish our triumphs. They are the ones who say, "You shouldn't have found wholeness that way" or 'how can you find wholeness by that approach when it is not our approach." They are the Pharisees they are the religious in-culture in every age, and in this age, the church crowd that so many people today are calling irrelevant and unknowing. They are the ones about whom today's spiritual seekers say, "There's is nothing for me in the church. I don't understand the lingo, the rituals, the cliques, the devotion to traditions that are stale, the inability to see beyond the walls for what the spirit is saying to the world."

Did you know there are people out there who say that? These Pharisees are the ones who thought they were lucid, clear thinking individuals who understood what must be done to be part of the people of God and part of the religious community. And in their conviction that they know all these things, they have become blind to what is real. Their relationship to the spirit of God is dead. Their sin is that they think everything is fine. Their sin is that they believe they are doing enough. Their sin is that they are blind, but think they see! This sin is the death of the soul. Theirs is the church that doesn't pay attention to its spiritual life whenever the people gather in worship, in meetings, in coffee corners, and in clubs. Theirs is the church that treats spirituality as an afterthought in the business of running an organization and getting things done. Theirs is the church that risks forgetting God. In their attention to detail, perhaps in their nit-picking, one might say, they pay such attention to the little things as to miss the big thing. They miss the rejoicing. They miss the joy. They miss the personal triumphs. They miss the ever-present Spirit of God that comes to give new depth and breadth to daily living. Their sin is that they won't believe there is anything more to life than what seems real today. They are stuck and can't move forward. They are those to whom Paul said, "Sleepers awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine upon you."

So, the short version of this lengthy description might be that this passage in John shows us a blindness that in fact sees, and a clear-sightedness that in fact sees nothing. We gain from this story the reminder that when we think we have all the answers, it's quite possible we have none; when we think we are doing enough, we are probably accomplishing little, when we are certain about our righteousness. We are probably on the verge of being lost; when we claim to know all we need to know about God, we have probably missed the point of searching for life's meaning; when we become very attentive to the flaws of others we are probably not paying enough attention to our own shortcomings; when we think we know how to run a church on our own, we risk closing the door on the God who created us and who offers to create us anew each day if we will be seek.

Finally, we learn that when we are spiritually infirm because we do not know any better, God will do great things in us to bring life to light not only for us but for all who will have eyes to see. But when we are spiritually infirm because our vanity makes us think we are strong, we risk our relationship with God and with the whole creation. The turn-around that can happen in a person's life, or in the life of a church, when they are able to say, "I don't know what God wants from me but I am willing to search it out" might be so astonishing as to be unbelievable.

It surely was in this lesson from John's gospel. I pray for myself, and for you, this turn around - this repentance – this restoring of sight, during these last weeks of the Lenten season. May we so unlearn everything we think we know, that Easter can come upon us fresh and life giving, that we will gain new eyes with which to see the risen Christ in our midst, in our church, and in the world that so longs to be made whole – "I don't know what God wants from me but I am willing to search it out." Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come; 'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far and Grace will lead me home.

Amen and amen.