



MINISTER
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Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 2, 2008

John 9:1-41

Blind Man's Bluff

Intro: The Gospel lessons during Lent tend to be longer than other times of the year. Some of you have noticed that. Scripture is good for us. This morning we hear all of the ninth chapter of John, which tells the story of a man blind from birth receiving his sight. Let us listen for God's word to us.

In my younger days, I used to enjoy a weekly routine of playing racquetball. Most often I would play with a friend's father, who tended to beat me much of the time. There was one game I remember, I made a shot where the ball was hit just right, it landed sharply to his backhand side. It was low and in a very difficult place. He raced towards it, gave a big swing and "whoosh" the ball went right by him. He turned to me with a look of wonder on his face, and said, "Did you see that?" "See what?" was my reply. "A miracle! The ball went right through my racquet." I looked puzzled and disbelieving. He said "you're blind", I said "you're bluffing."

Now I had seen the ball, and I had seen him swing. I had seen the ball bounce the second time behind him. Now I believe that maybe the Mythbusters could come up with some kind of scientific explanation, that it is possible for a racquetball, if hit fast enough to push its way through the strings of a racquet (if the strings are very loose.) I also believe that there is the power of God at work in the world, which can do things that seem to be impossible. But as I figured it this time, I think he just missed the ball.

It was just an ordinary day and an ordinary game. And I'm sure he wasn't serious, but I asked myself later, what if he was? What if this was a moment I was confronted with a choice as to whether or

not I believed something unique and special happened. Suppose we both agreed that something strange had happened to the ball or to the racquet and something unexpected and "unnatural" had happened there on the court. Even if the two of us agreed it was a miracle, how would others choose to explain or interpret our experience?

Looking at this story of Jesus and the blind beggar at the temple, it is a fairly simple straightforward story as we read it. Jesus saw a man blind from birth in the temple. He has compassion for him. Jesus goes over to him and using standard methods of healing, he puts mud and spittle on the man's eyes, and the man receives his sight. But even if those are the facts of the matter, the miracle doesn't solve anything. In fact, the miracle seems to create more problems than it helps.

First, there are those who have known the man all his life. The neighbors, the people who passed him begging every day in the temple, the authorities, are not sure this is the same man. If anyone be in Christ, that person is a new creation, so the Scriptures tell us, and so the people around this man are not sure whether 1) this is another man who happens to look like the old beggar, 2) whether it is the old beggar who has been pretending to be blind all these years, 3) the old beggar who was blind but now can see.

The people who saw the unexpected in their midst, they looked away, because to say that this was the blind man who can now see, raises for them questions deeper and more troubling than they want to face. They want to evade the obvious so that they will not have to commit themselves as to the why and the how. If this is the blind beggar we have known from birth, then something strange has come into our world and disrupted the way we had it figured out. The popular assumption was that sin was the cause of any suffering.

This man was the product of sin, either his own or his parents. For those who admit it was the same man are faced with explaining it. Either this was a sinful man who had been visited by the grace of God so he could see, or the one who did this act must be in the power of evil, and yet it begs the question of why would an evil man do a good thing.

The Pharisees are quick to resolve this issue. They say Jesus is a sinful man who uses the power of evil to give sight to this man to confuse the good, and we know he is evil they say because he healed on the Sabbath. Some of the neighbors refuse to recognize the man as the same one, because they did not want to have to answer the deeper theological questions. Who is this that has power to give sight to the blind? The Pharisees, on the basis of their traditions, recognize

that something strange has happened, a blind man sees, and yet it must be an evil thing because it was done on the Sabbath. Jesus refuses to accept this notion that our physical misfortunes are the manifestation of our sins. He simply dismisses that notion out of hand.

Surely one of the reasons Jesus will not accept the notion that human pain and suffering is the result of sin is that there is a very destructive flip side to that conviction. It is the conviction that if we have been spared such suffering, we must not be sinful. If sin is punished by sickness, blindness, and other difficulties, and we do not have such major problems, that must mean we have been graded O.K. by God. Jesus will not allow us to live with either side of that idea.

The blind man's own parents are not eager to get caught up in this discussion either. The authorities come to them to interview them. You can see the mob of reporters rushing to the door to interview the parents and the brothers and sisters. "Is that really your brother? Is that your son who was born blind? Was he really blind? How do you explain that?"

They wiggle to get away from the attention of the authorities and the mob. Yes, that is our boy. Yes, he was blind from birth. Yes, he seems to be able to

see. He is over eighteen. Go and ask him how it happened.

And the blind man himself is unable to give complete answers. All he knows is that there was a man who was called Jesus who gave him his sight. They ask him again. Do you want to become his disciple? We are disciples of Moses. There are none so blind as he who will not see. The blind man sees that for him to affirm that what happened to him was a God given gift, he was going to have to affirm that the one who gave it was a God sent agent, and that decision would exclude him from the local religious community.

The blind beggar saw what is at the center of human life. Ultimately we have to decide to gamble our lives on the reality and power of God on the basis of the events that happen to us. And yet one cannot have the chance of choosing life without there also being the danger of conflict and opposition as the opportunity is accepted or rejected.

The miracle of the healing of the blind beggar did not solve anything for anybody other than him, but it did confront all who saw it with the demand to make a decision about what was happening in their lives and who is at work in this world.

Most of us don't have that kind of dramatic experience, but all of us have experiences that force us to decide, or invite us to consider, what we believe about what is happening in our world. Life is full of these events, maybe not balls going through racquets, but moments which challenge us to decide what is at work in our lives and what does life want from us.

"The ball went right through my racquet." It could have, but this time I decide against believing that it happened. The ball may have gone through his racquet, but it wasn't a miracle, because it awakened no faith in either of us. The blind beggar in the temple was given his sight; it was a miracle for him because it awakened his faith in the God who was acting in Jesus, he could declare, this I know, but the miracle didn't help his parents, or his neighbors, or the people in the temple. Each of us will have to decide what happened. Amen.