

LOVE THAT LIGHTENS THE DARKNESS

Lent 4 – Year A: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41

Whenever I read John's account of the man blind from birth, I am struck by how this miracle which, according to Hebrew prophecy affirms Jesus' messianic identity, is embroiled in controversy. The fact that the man regains his sight is almost incidental to the interrogation he undergoes, courtesy of Jesus' adversaries who, it seems, are intent on using this occasion of grace to bring Jesus down. Interestingly, their attempts fail, largely because the man healed by Jesus gives them nothing to use against Jesus. The Pharisees feed him leading questions, and he refuses to be led. They try to discredit Jesus by suggesting that he is a sinner for making mud (that is, doing work) on the Sabbath, and the man whose sight has been restored becomes their worthy opponent in theological debate, asserting that Jesus is, at the very least, a prophet.

For me, there are two things that shine through this story: Jesus' goodness in reaching out to the man and healing him, and the man's emergence in the story as a fully-developed three-dimensional character. He may remain nameless, but he is certainly not anonymous: we learn more about this man's character in these 41 verses than we learn about most of the principals in the gospels. And although John doesn't let us see his complete transition from a blind beggar who was labelled by his disability and shunned to someone acceptable to the mainstream of society, we do see him fully incorporated in the community of his neighbours for a while, and we see him in dialogue with the curious Pharisees who, prior to the miracle, would not have given him the time of day.

What is significant, of course, is that almost as soon as the man is accepted as a full member of the community because of Jesus, it is also because of Jesus that he is thrown out again. In talking with the Pharisees, he has become too pointed, it seems. Referring to his former blindness, they describe him as one who was "born entirely in sins" and then they say sarcastically, "...you are trying to teach us?" The Pharisees or other religious people with power – John uses the term "the Jews" – drive him out.

After the man is thrown out of his own community, Jesus again reaches out to him, and wastes no time in re-incorporating him, this time into the community of his disciples. Again, Jesus' love liberates the man, placing him into a new community in which love and welcome and respect and acceptance are the marks. At the beginning of this passage, Jesus says to his disciples, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." He then heals the man who was blind from birth and the story begins.

When I lived and worked in Brantford, I became close to a number of teachers and students at the W. Ross MacDonald School, formerly the Ontario School for the Blind. It was a wonderful education for me to be immersed in this community of care, learning, and mutual support. Although one emphasis of the school was to provide training for the students to compensate for not being able to see – they all learned braille in those days and learned how to use a machine that embossed paper with the braille bumps (the machine was called a brailler); although they spent much of their time developing skills needed to walk in public and to live independently, at least an equal part of their program was equipping them for integration into the mainstream of society. And the victories both students and teachers enjoyed so much was in being 'seen' by others as normal, regular people whose abilities far outweighed their one disability. In the years since I left Brantford, integration has become an even-greater emphasis, with many students leaving the Ross MacDonald School mid-high school in order to join the mainstream of society. None of us has the power Jesus had to heal the man blind from birth, but we do have the power of love that stands at the heart and centre of Jesus' interaction with the man, the power to challenge our own short-sightedness concerning those around us; the power to welcome, respect, and accept others. The real darkness in our world that affects everyone is our seeming propensity to do the opposite: to keep our distance, to organize society into "us" and "them;" to retreat, rather than become involved; to look after our own interests first, and then consider the needs of others.

Perhaps because the man blind from birth had suffered so long as an outsider, strength and courage came easily to him when he was challenged, first by his neighbours and then by the Pharisees. We can't say, really, but we certainly see that he's no doormat. John, I believe, would have us notice his strength of character and identify with it. Discipleship is clearly on the table through all the discussion that ensues; and in what may be the climax of the argument, the man turns the tables on the Pharisees by asking, "Do you also want to become his disciples?" It is a great rhetorical moment, but it also says to us, John's readers,

first, that the man has already become a disciple of Jesus, even before Jesus searches him out later in the reading; and second, that this story is presented for us, for our notice, for our formation as Jesus' disciples. Love is power, John would say to us. 'Look how this man was empowered by Jesus reaching out to him! Consider your own power having received the same love in the gift of the gospel!'

There is a lovely comment in this morning's First Reading that, for me, reminds us of our calling as the children of God, disciples of Jesus, and those who have the capacity to bear the light of Christ. God says to Samuel as Samuel presents Jesse's son Eliab for divine approval as Israel's next king, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

We are here today because God has looked on our hearts. And we are called to do no less in our relationship with others. It is love, God's love and the love of God we bear for others, that lightens the darkness of this world.