

# What Can You See

[John 9:1--41]

K Karpen, Sunday, March 6, 2005

Fourth Sunday in Lent

One Great Hour of Sharing

Sacrament of Holy Communion

[John 9:1-41, "What Can You See," K Karpen, Sunday, March 6, 2005]

"Some Pharisees heard this and said to Jesus, "Surely, we are not blind, are we?" Jesus replied, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see," your sin remains..."

John chapter 9 is a great healing story. A person blind from birth is noticed, is seen, by Jesus. Jesus spits on the ground and makes mud. He spreads the mud on the man's eyes. He spreads the mud on the man's eyes. He sends the man to wash off the mud in the pool of Siloam & when the man comes back—he can see! And nobody recognizes him. That's when the fun starts. It's a great healing story.

But I don't think it's mainly a healing story. John 9 is a great conflict story. This healing causes conflict and disagreement and distrust everywhere. Among the man's neighbors, who can't agree about what happened, or even if he's still the same guy. Between the Pharisees and the man. Between the Pharisees and the man's parents. Between the Pharisees and Jesus.

Whatever its origins, the story sits here in John's gospel, as a metaphor of the conflict that John's community is experiencing with other Jewish leaders, as they all work through the question of whether you can be a follower of Jesus and still be Jewish. Fascinating. But I don't see it as mainly a conflict story, either.

John 9 is called a sermon. But I don't want to preach a sermon about a sermon. John 9 strikes me, first and foremost, as a story about conversion. I'd like us to take a few minutes and, with the help of this story, think through the issue & idea of conversion. Maybe even our own conversion.

I know good liberals aren't always comfortable talking about conversion, especially religious conversion. It's one of those words we've too readily ceded to the fundamentalists & conservatives. Too bad. We'll come back to that later.

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In the New Testament, blindness & sight is often used as a metaphor for conversion. Think of Saul, who was blinded on the Damascus Road and eventually turns his life around, becoming the apostle Paul. This story here, of the man born blind, speaks of physical blindness, sure; but it has more to say about spiritual blindness. The man born blind receives his physical sight at verse 7; he doesn't see who Jesus is until verse 38. You get the idea that physical blindness is not as hard to cure as our spiritual blindness.

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I have come to understand, slowly, that we all need conversion. We each sit deeply in need of conversion. We each sit deeply mired in our own spiritual blindness. The fact that most of us don't see it that way probably means that we need it more.

Like the Pharisees. Good people! The liberal wing of first century Judaism. But like most of us liberals, they were deeply resistant to change. Especially when it means changing ourselves.

Jesus isn't that interested in change. He's interested in conversion. He's interested in turning things on their heads. He is interested in a complete change of direction. He's interested in a world where the blind see; the lame walk; the deaf hear; the low become high and the high, low; the dead live. Or as Charles Wesley put it a year after his own conversion:

Jesus! The name that charms our fears  
and bids our sorrows cease!  
Music in the sinners ears  
life & health & peace!

He breaks the power of cancelled sin  
He sets the prisoner free  
His blood can make the foulest clean  
His blood availed for me.

He speaks, and listening to his voice,  
new life the dead receive.  
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice!  
The humble poor believe.

Hear him! Ye deaf.  
His praise, ye dumb, your loosed tongues employ!  
Ye blind? Behold your savior come!  
Leap! Ye lame, for joy.

And because he hadn't yet made his case for what conversion means in the context of Christ—he goes on with the hymn.

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Harlots! (We don't sing this part.)  
and publicans and thieves  
in holy triumph join!  
Saved is the sinner that believes, saved  
From crimes as great as mine.

Murderers (We don't sing this part either.)  
and all ye hellish crew  
ye sons of lust and pride  
Believe the savior died for you;  
for me the savior died.

And in case you think he's only talking about individual salvation here—or that Jesus was—Wesley throws in this verse.

Look unto God, ye nations,  
Own your God, ye fallen race!  
Look! And be saved by faith alone  
be justified by what?  
by grace.

Now that I got that out of my system there are just a few things I'd like to share with you about conversion; then I'm done. Just 4 things about how conversion doesn't happen, then I'll quit and leave the rest up to you and the grace of God.

Conversion doesn't happen to you by yourself.  
Conversion doesn't happen to someone else.  
Conversion doesn't happen all at once.  
Conversion doesn't happen once for always.

So here's what I believe about conversion. 1. Conversion doesn't happen to you by yourself. Conversion comes from the Latin word, conversion—literally, to turn with. We need partners in our conversion. We need to turn with Jesus—not go off by ourself. We need to turn with God. We need to turn with each other and go a different direction together. Paul had Ancenias. Who do you have? Who's your partner in conversion?

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2. Conversion doesn't happen to someone else. O, that it would! All the people in my life who are in need of conversion! All the people in my life who are totally blind to their own faults and failures. Please God, do something with them!

And they are never going to change until I'm ready to change. They are never going to convert until I'm ready to convert. They are never going to see their spiritual blindness until I am. How would it be if you and I came to see those we lovingly call the religious right as our conversion partners and they us? The world would surely change.

3. Third of K's great truths about conversion. Conversion doesn't happen all at once. For the man born blind it takes 30 verses. For Paul it takes 5 chapters of the Book of Acts to convert him from Saul to Paul. John & Charles Wesley didn't get converted until a decade after they were ordained. There's hope for us all! Your spiritual blindness might fall away in a hurry, and still it's going to take a while to look around and see everything differently and go in a new direction.

4. And finally, conversion doesn't happen once for all. Most of us are constantly in need of conversion—and, as Jesus says, "Just when we say, we see! our blindness remains." Conversion is a process. It's a journey. It never stops. It never ends. It's as eternal as God because our need for conversion is as eternal as God. Thank God.

Let's pray.

Jesus! The name that charms our fears and bids our sorrows cease. You are music in all of our ears. You are life! and health! and peace.