

“The Man Born Blind: Hope for Us in Need”

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Text: John 9: 1 - 12

Rev. Peter Coutts

The story of a man born blind. Close your eyes. Think about how our worship service would be hard for you today if you were blind. You would have trouble navigating your way to our building and finding a place to sit. The bulletin would be useless to you. You couldn't sing the hymns unless you memorized the lyrics. The lounge at coffee hour would be a big challenge! That's just getting through one hour of one day. Imagine the challenge of a lifetime of blindness. This was the reality of the man born blind. It created needs in his life that we who see really can't appreciate. All he could do was beg to make ends meet, day in and day out.

“Why was this man born blind?” At first glance the apostles' answer to this question, and then Jesus' answer to this question, appears pretty harsh. The apostles asked, “was it the sin of this man or his parents that caused the blindness?” This idea was common in Jesus day. Many thought God inflicted punishment – directly & immediately – on those who sinned. And, if God was angry enough, that punishment could extend through four generations of children! That's harsh! But Jesus' answer seems equally harsh. “He was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him”. One could almost read this verse and think God caused this man to be born blind, and to live blind all his life, to be a ready sermon illustration for this moment when Jesus and his followers passed. Wow, that's harsh! Neither answer is very appealing for this poor blind man.

But if we take a different point of view, the story unfolds in a different way. Jesus said, “He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him”. Blindness created specific needs in this specific man. But let's rephrase what Jesus said more generally. “He was born with needs so that God's works might be revealed in him”. Who else do you know who live with needs in their lives? Well, actually that would be everyone, especially at some times in our lives. The specific need could be health, financial strains, family turmoil, political unrest, unemployment, depression, addiction, threats, spiritual... you name it, all of us in life can have specific needs that ebb and flow like the tide. So this blind man is our representative, standing in our place before Jesus. All of a sudden Jesus' answer takes on a new shade of meaning. Hear it again while thinking that it applies to each of us. “we are born in our needs so that God's works might be revealed in us.”

There are two points in this teaching that are helpful to us all. The first is an acknowledgment. It is part of the order of God's creation that we are born into a life that can know challenges. We appreciate this,

as we see different people suffer in different ways all around us every day. For some, like this blind man, the challenges can be significant. Your challenge and mine, your need and mine are very different from his. But in this acknowledgment we have a universal truth: it is the human experience to know needs.

But then the second part of the teaching. Jesus said life is like this “so that God’s works might be revealed in us, who are in need”. There’s an old saying that people are most likely to turn to God “when our backs are to the stained glass windows (that is, when we are in worship) or when our backs are to the wall”. We easily slip through daily life when needs are not apparent. But when they are we look for help, and one source is God. And in those moments, when we feel the security of God’s presence and believe we’ve had an answer to prayer, it’s then that God’s works have been revealed in us. When we’ve had a moment like this, we can find ourselves grateful.

But is this help only for the tough times? Is it only for those like the man born blind? I don’t think so. Again, Jesus answer was, that God wants God’s works to be revealed in us. What might be the shape of those works? Well, our growing closer to God in a communing relationship. Appreciation of God’s presence to us in our day to day life. Our desire to understand faith better. Our intention to live our Christianity more faithfully. These too are needs, aren’t they? Precious needs that God desires to meet in us, and does so through the work of the Holy Spirit. It speaks of a different kind of blindness, doesn’t it, that God wants to lift from any of us.

The American Presbyterian minister Benjamin Weir was abducted by terrorists in Lebanon in 1984, to spend 16 months as a hostage – 12 of those in isolation. He was asked after his release how he managed to cope. “I counted my blessings daily” he said. “What blessings?”, the reporter asked with some surprise. “Well, some days my soup included a few vegetables. Every day I knew my family held me in their love”. After his release Rev. Weir became a voice for reconciliation and tolerance. We are born with needs so God’s works might be revealed in us. In Weir, those works are revealed in his deep sense of faith and his willingness to forgive.

So how are God’s works revealed in us? If indeed the story of the man born blind is also our own story, then like Weir we have our own blessings to count as we remember the ways God has touched us in our lives. As the old Sunday school hymn put it, “Count your blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done”. This gives us something to celebrate and be grateful for. For in remembering our blessings we are affirming that God has, in some way, touched us. But it goes further. Remembering how God has touched us builds confidence in the face of further need. For if we believe that God has stood with us and helped us in the past, we will have assurance that God will do the same again.

These themes are illustrated at the table of our Lord today. Anglicans call communion "Eucharist". The meaning of this Greek word is "thankfulness". When we come to this table we come in gratitude for God's blessings. And that blessing is seen, in all its power, in Christ's death for our sake. As Jesus held up the bread and wine, he alluded to an event that would take place within hours: "this is my body broken for you.... This is my blood shed for you". Christ's pivotal gift given to meet our most basic need. His self-sacrifice, given that we might truly know God, and enjoy God for eternity. When we see the glory of that gift, like the blind man our eyes too are opened, and we are grateful. Blessings indeed!

Here, at this table, we come to eat. Hunger is a need that is never satisfied. It returns to us again and again and again. At this table we see symbolized another reality: our needs for God can never be satisfied, once for all. So we come to this table, for meal after meal after meal. But we come here in assurance, for we come knowing our blessings. And as he has done in the past, so we believe he will continue to bless us in our need.

As you come today, to the table of grace our Lord has provided, come in gratitude remembering how God's works have been revealed in you. Come in prayer for the works of God you hope will be revealed in you. May this be a blessing. May God be revealed to you here.