

July 10, 2016

“Least known, most interesting: The man born blind”

John 9:1-2, 5-9, 13-17, 28-38,

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In the midst of a week of news that feels all too old, all too familiar, (a black man’s death at the hands of law enforcement and terror from gun violence) we are starting a new sermon series today called *Least known, most interesting*. The hope is to explore some of the people from the bible that we don’t know very well; we don’t know their stories, often we don’t know their names, but their stories are powerful and purposeful because of course.. their stories are scripture. Today we begin with the story we refer to by the main character: the man born blind, unnamed but his story takes up a fair amount of space in the gospels. We will not read the entire text but rather some selected verses from John 9...Listen for the word of God.

One very interesting note about this story is that for the bulk of it Jesus is not present. He departs from the scene right after the healing which leaves the rest of the people in the story to focus on *their* response to who Jesus is and what he has just done.

But back to the beginning of the story. It starts with a question from the disciples who are presumably out for a stroll with the Son of God, (as you do) and upon seeing a man by the side of the road they pose a theological question. The man is described as a beggar in Mark’s gospel, but in this story he says nothing, asks for nothing, not even a miracle. He is nothing more than a topic of conversation for the disciples.

The disciples’ question reveal not only their but our own culture’s continued assumptions that an illness or condition is the person’s fault. Instead of looking at a *system* that creates poverty, racism even unclean water and acknowledging we are all part of that system the disciples wonder about individual sin. The disciples do not seem to be interested in a miracle but in a theological debate, they want to know cause and effect. The blind man is no more than a theological talking point. It is not hard to get inside their heads because we see this everyday, the constant media cycle, questioning, questioning, circling around human lives seeking another angle, another underside, another controversy. But we are starting to see the debate is leaving a stain. We know there is bias, political spin even blindness but we don’t know what to do about it.

The disciples too have bias, they come with a certain world view and you cannot just shake that off. Jesus, however, does not share that world view and is quite happy to do some shaking. His response to the disciples’ question turns the conversation towards the work that needs to be done and the limited time there is to do it.

In fact, “the ‘need’ that evokes the miracle, then, is not the man’s blindness, but the need for God’s works to be made manifest.”¹

The man, formerly known as the man born blind, testifies and gives witness not only to Jesus as Lord and Healer but against the blindness that spit in his face. He was a living witness against those who “feared the establishment” or “blamed the victim” or accepted generational classism. His new sight testified against accepting cultural norms that put people in their place, discredited hope and used fear to push personal agendas that hurt the wider community.

Once again this week because of video we are witnesses to the death of a black man after an encounter with law enforcement. Different people may have different takes on what they see in that video but you have to admit if it were not for those videos the community outside of Baton Rouge and Falcon Heights wouldn’t even be talking about Aaron Sterling and Philando Castile.

Because (much like the community of the blind man) we have come to accept that my interpretation of an event is just as valid as yours even if I have never had the experience of said event, known anyone who has had experience of said event or listened to anyone who has. We do not need a video of a black man being shot to death to believe it happened. And yet apparently we do.

One look at social media or the news will demonstrate its all still up for debate – whose fault it is, who should accept responsibility, whether this was isolated or a trend, who the real victim is and so on and so on... But we know this is true: *“Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.”²*

The man born blind. The boy with the toy gun. The man selling loose cigarettes. The woman who failed to signal... We cannot forget who they are, who we are – we are made in the image of God, all of us, whether we sell CDs outside a convenience store or carry a badge. We are not made to put anyone by the side of the road, outside the conversation or beyond the limit of God’s loving embrace.

Least known and most interesting indeed. I want so much to name this man – only known to us as The Man Born Blind. He is so much more than that title. I hate referring to him by something beyond his control, an event – his birth – something he had no power over. He is more than the thing that put him there by the side of the road, the side of his tribe, the side of fellowship with his community. He was on the outside and that’s all he was known as. I want him to be named, to be seen as the child of God by those who read his story, this story in scripture. I want him to be human. I want him to be KNOWN. I’ve wrestled around with different names for him – the man healed sounds better, perhaps the man made whole, the man who gave witness... Fred even.

¹ NIB commentary

² anon

And then come Thursday I knew his name.

It is Alton Sterling.

Philando Castile.

His name is Tamir Rice.

Sandra Bland.

Trayvon Martin.

Eric Garner.

Freddie Gray.

Clementa Pinckney

The silence is uncomfortable, isn't it? Were you wondering 'has she lost her voice', 'forgotten what to say', 'are we supposed to say something now?' Silence is uncomfortable and it's deadly. We should be very uncomfortable with silence when it comes to naming injustice.

Imagine our friend the blind man sitting by the side of the road there not knowing moment to moment what might happen next. Will it be another day of no one seeing me or my struggle? Or will this be one of those days someone thinks it is funny to come and spit on me or shout disparaging things about my family. Will someone come and strike me when I am not able to defend myself because I won't see it coming? And will anyone believe me if I speak out? When I come before the community with the story of what has happened to me will I be told I am telling my own story *incorrectly*? That I cannot be believed? Or will today be the day I am saved. Will today be the day someone sees me.

Jesus did not spend a minute worrying about how blame was to be placed regarding the man's blindness. He did not concern himself with arguments about whether or not this man had a record of wrong, a history of suspicious and unseemly behavior, he did not engage in the debate over whether or not proper procedure was involved. He got straight to the healing so that man could be restored to community and the power of God could be demonstrated.

We do not have the power that Jesus has but we do have power and if we don't use it for the healing of our communities we are all condemned to sit by the side of the road and helplessly ask "how long" until there is no one left to cry for any of us.

Make space in your life for voices different than yours. Find blogs, news centers, music, locales where the voices are not yours. Let us stop finding articles and blogs and friends who reinforce our world view. Do not be like the Pharisees who can only defend a way of life they cling to so

tightly that they cannot see the new Way even when it stands before them in the form of the God who made them.

Let us challenge ourselves to be more open than we think we are able. Listen. Practice listening. Check yourself when you find yourself getting angry or defensive or paralyzed with guilt. If you bristle at “black lives matter” ask yourself ‘why?’ Thank a police officer for their service. Remember that today it feels scary to be black and it feels scary to wear the blue. We are sadly unified in that way.

Pray that tomorrow all we might see in our neighbor is Christ. And let us live as though every person deserves to make it home safe to the people they love.³

³ (lifted from Charles Blow)