

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE BEST KIND

5) The Man Born Blind

John 9: 1-41

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They say that all good things must come to an end and this past week, we were reminded of this timeless truth when we witnessed the final episode in the six seasons of Downton Abbey. How many of you are Downton Abbey fans? It obviously created quite a viewing audience over its six year run. While the overall plot, if you will, portrayed the saga of an English royal family as they faced the challenge of changing times and changing lives, there were, each week, sub-plots that featured each of the main characters and ongoing story lines that led from one episode to the next.

Would Mr. Bates ever be freed from his unjust prison sentence? Would Edith ever be rewarded with the true love that she deserved? Would Lord Grantham find a way to preserve and manage the estate in the face of social upheaval? And, of course, what Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes ever acknowledge their love for each other? These and other questions were answered each week and kept us coming back for more.

As I read and reread John's account of Jesus' close encounter with the man born blind, it occurs to me that there is a similar literary approach at work. There is the main "plot" at work in John's Gospel that features Jesus, the "light of the world," as he goes about his work of bringing sight to those who are blind in both the physical and spiritual sense. Then there are the sub-plots that happen within this episode of Jesus' ministry and, if you listened carefully to our lesson this morning, there are a whole lot of sub-plots goin' on!

Very briefly, I would like to provide an overview of this passage and its plot as well as its many sub-plots.

The passage begins with a theological discussion between Jesus and his disciples. The disciples see a blind man and speculate about the cause of the man's blindness. They assume that it is the result either of his own sin or the sin of his parents. Jesus suggests, however, that sin has nothing to do with the man's blindness. Instead he suggests that the man's blindness provides an opportunity for him to illustrate God's purpose at work in the world. **"We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day: night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."** (John 9: 4-5)

This statement reflects, once again, the primary premise of the entire Gospel of John—one that we see reflected throughout the stories and teachings that John includes. Jesus is the light of the world, bringing sight to those who are blind both physically and spiritually.

This, of course, is exactly what takes place after this initial discussion between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus proceeds to spit on the ground, mixing saliva and mud into a paste that he places upon the man's eyes. He instructs him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does as he is instructed and returns, able for the first time in his life, to see. In this

very brief and simple exchange, Jesus gives witness to his purpose of restoring sight to the blind.

The man's neighbors are, understandably stunned by the fact that this blind man that they have known as a beggar, can now see. And immediately, they begin to debate whether or not it is really the same man. Some say it is and others suggest that it is not. The man then answers their dispute by telling them that, indeed, he is one and the same man. When the neighbors ask how this is possible, he answers that he does not know, but that it was Jesus who gave him his sight. They want to know where Jesus is, but he replies that he does not know.

The neighbor's initial confusion and debate over this man's healing then escalates as they take him to the Pharisees, the religious authorities. The authorities were concerned by the fact that this healing had taken place on the Sabbath in clear violation of the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy—that is without work. But the authorities, like the neighbors, are of divided opinion about Jesus. Some say he cannot be a sinner because of the signs he has performed. Others say that no, this man has violated the Sabbath and therefore, cannot be from God. As they try to solve the mystery, they ask the man, **“What do you say about him?”** He replies quite simply, **“He is a prophet.”**

Still not satisfied, the authorities decide to summon the man's parents in order to determine if, in fact, this man had been born blind. And, if that is the case, how is it possible that he can now see?

The man's parents, however, are not about to allow themselves to be trapped into saying something that they would later regret. They knew that if they gave credit to Jesus, that the authorities would likely perceive that as a threat—one that might lead them to expel them from the synagogue—a social form of shunning that was worse than death. Rather than risk being shunned by the rest of the community, they carefully responded by saying that while, yes, this was their son, they did not know how this healing took place. **“Ask him,”** they suggested, **“he is of age.”** They were not about to take the bait that the authorities dangled before them.

With a building sense of frustration, the authorities interview the man a second time—still trying to get him to say what they want him to say: namely, that Jesus is a sinner who broke the law of God. But the man, to his everlasting credit, refuses to play along with their strong armed tactics. He responds to their argument by saying: **“I don't know if he is a sinner or not. What I do know is that once I was blind, but now I see.”**

The authorities will not relent: **“What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”**

The man, no doubt experiencing his own sense of frustration then chides them for their persistent questions. **“Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”** Well, at this point, it becomes clear that this exchange would not likely tend well and, to be sure, it did not. When the man further challenges their authority by insisting that, by virtue of the fact that Jesus gave him his sight, then surely he was doing the work of God, that was all they needed to hear.

The line had been crossed. In anger, they lash out at the man: You were born entirely in sins and you are trying to teach us? The man is then expelled from the synagogue.

Upon hearing that the man had been expelled from the synagogue, Jesus finds the man and shifts the topic of their conversation from the matter of physical sight to that of spiritual sight.

“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Jesus asks. “Tell me,” the man replies, “so that I may believe in him.”

Jesus then replies: **“You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he.”**

The man then makes his profession of faith: **“Lord, I believe.”** And the writer then tells us that he worshipped him—the only occasion in the Gospel of John where such an act takes place. In the short span a mere chapter, the man gains not only his physical sight, but also, his spiritual sight as well.

The story then concludes with a brief teaching moment in which Jesus suggests that he has come into the world **“so that those who do not see, may see, and those who do see may become blind.”** When some of the authorities ask him if he is suggesting that they are blind, he replies, in effect: **“If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you’re accountable for every fault and failure.”** While this response can be a bit confusing, suffice it to say that Jesus was confirming that, in their insistence that they could see, they were only kidding themselves. They were, to put it very bluntly, as blind as bats.

With the conclusion of this intense drama and its many sub-plots, we are left to consider just what meaning, if any, it might hold for us. While there are many options for our consideration, I believe that this final exchange between Jesus and the authorities is worthy of our attention. With these rather blunt words, Jesus gets at the heart of the matter.

The real sin in this story, has nothing to do with the man born blind or his parents. And it had nothing to do with Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath. Instead, it had everything to do with the pretense and posturing of the religious authorities who were certain that they knew the will and the way of God. In fact, they were so certain that they were willing to “play God” in passing judgment upon Jesus and his choice to give sight to a blind man on the Sabbath. Their sin lies in the arrogance and pride of their judgmentalism.

The great irony, of course, lies in the fact that it is the once blind man who gains his sight in this close encounter and it is those who have sight that are, in fact, blind to the truth that Jesus embodies. Go figure!

It is noteworthy that the once blind man gains both his physical and his spiritual sight. But his spiritual sight comes to him gradually. He moves, in the course of the narrative, from not knowing much about Jesus to identifying him as a prophet, to asserting that he has come from God, to believing that he is the Son of Man and worshipping him.

His transformation happens not all at once, but gradually, as the story unfolds. He thus becomes the writer's "exhibit A" in demonstrating the life changing power of the light that Jesus brought into the world.

The religious authorities, on the other hand, are not growing, but regressing. They become more and more blind, in the course of the story, as they refuse to listen to the witness of the man, his parents, or his neighbors. Driven by their fear, anger and jealousy, they refuse to see the light of the world that stands before them.

What we have then, are two very different responses the revelation of God's work in the world. One was open, accepting, willing to listen, to learn and to see what God was doing. The other was closed, fearful, resentful, and judgmental. They simply were not willing and perhaps, unable to see outside the box in which they held God captive.

So, which of these responses most accurately reflects your own? Not only your response to God and matters spiritual, but your response to others and the ways in which you approach life itself? **Are you open or closed?** Do you listen to others or do you presume you already know what they have to say? Are you willing to edit, revise and relearn what you thought you knew? Or, are you so locked in on certainty that you simply refuse to consider the possibility that someone else might have a better perspective?

Many, if not most, of us are frustrated with what is taking place in the political arena today. While there are, no doubt, many reasons for the lack of civility, statesmanship, and bi-partisanship that we are witnessing, I am inclined to think that primary, among those reasons, is **the mindset that is so set on the truth as they want it to be or as their party wants it to be, that they can't possibly see the truth as it might actually be.**

I have a strong suspicion that the truth is often revealed most clearly and most powerfully in the choice to listen to the other side, to be open to other thoughts, to be receptive the ideas that come from outside the box of our limited ideas. What if our politicians would actually listen to each other and be receptive to the truth that others can bring to the equation of working together for the greater good?

And what if, we would choose to do the same in the context of the arena of our everyday lives and the everyday people who inhabit those lives? I realize that this is a rather radical idea, but what if we would choose to begin each day with the assumption that we have at least one thing to learn in the course of that day—and perhaps one idea that needs to be revised or perhaps, discarded? I like that idea so much that I would like to make it your assignment for the week ahead! I invite you to live each day not in the arrogance of assuming that you know all that you need to know, but in the humility of realizing just how much you have to learn.

It's a focus, I believe, that could change everything! In fact, it is a focus that just might enable you to actually see...the way you see yourself, the way you see others, the way you see life...and yes, the way you see God in ways, perhaps, that you have never seen before.

I pray that it will be so—in your life and in mine. Amen!