

Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

This long gospel reading, a reading about a man born blind, is rich in interpersonal dynamics, readings of about how “us” and “them” dynamics play out, readings about limiting questions and readings about disability.

The disciples ask a question about a man who was born blind – their question assumes that sin was the cause, and this question of ‘causality’ continues to invade the lives of many people. While Jesus elevates the answer somewhat, it is true that the gospels in general treat blindness as a metaphor. When writing this reflection, I asked a Corrymeela Community member, Dave, who is blind what he thinks about this idea of blindness as a metaphor for lack of insight. He said “Don’t use my impairment as a metaphor for your ignorance.” It’s a wise point he makes.

We see in this text the struggle to believe. So many of the characters are unable to believe what they so plainly see in front of them. It can be a fearful thing to not be believed because you risk expulsion, like the parents in this narrative. And subsequently, harsh borders between who is in the “us” crowd and who is in the “them” crowd can be established, to the detriment of belief, community and transformation.

In situations of conflict, questions, definitions of “us” and the tendency to disbelieve what you do not understand are all severe limitations upon friendship, connection and belonging. In few places in the gospel are these dynamics outlined more artfully than in this week’s reading from John.

Text

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. 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.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Comment

In the first instance, this text may be summarised in a series of questions.

- "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"
- "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"
- He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"
- They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."
- Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?"
- And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."
- "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"
- "We know that this is our son, and that he was born

blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.”

- They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”
- He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”
- They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.
- “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”
- He answered, “And who is he, sir?”
- Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”

Taking this summary approach, one can see questions that display curiosity, invitation, constriction and hostility. The binary question “Who sinned? This man or his parents?” allows no space whatsoever for questioning “Why are you asking about sin?” The lens through which the disciples view the life of the man born blind from birth is so limiting, and it is the disciples, in the first instance, who are in need of intellectual, social and moral conversion. In this way, we see that sometimes it is the mode of questioning, not to mention the background thinking that leads to the question, that contributes to situations of conflict.

Where the disciples were constrained into a question of assigning sin, the Pharisees are likewise constrained into siloed camps of “us” and “them”. It is interesting to pay attention to some of the pronouns (we, you, he, they, I) in the questions and surrounding dialogue:

- So for the second time *they* called the man who had been blind, and *they* said to *him*, “Give glory to God! *We* know that this man is a sinner.”
- *He* answered *them*, “I have told *you* already, and *you* would not listen. Why do *you* want to hear it again? Do *you* also want to become his disciples?”
- Then *they* reviled *him*, saying, “*You* are his disciple, but *we* are disciples of Moses. *We* know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, *we* do not know where *he* comes from.”
- The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! *You* do not know where *he* comes from, and yet *he* opened my eyes. *We* know that God does not listen to sinners, but *he* does listen to one who worships *him* and obeys *his* will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, *he* could do nothing.”
- *They* answered him, “*You* were born entirely in sins, and are *you* trying to teach *us*?” And *they* drove him out.
- Some of the Pharisees near *him* heard this and said to him, “Surely *we* are not blind, are *we*?” Jesus said to them, “If *you* were blind, *you* would not have sin. But now that *you* say, ‘*We* see,’ your sin remains.

One can see how language that cause delination between people and language that invites is evident in the dialogue in this dramatic text. The blind man uses “we” in a way to seek to build bridges, building on his own dramatic experience of sight. In response to this, he, by association is in turns both disbelieved and then somewhat expelled from any belonging with the Pharisees. The man born blind sees to gather, but the response seeks to expel. The parents of the man born blind – and the consultation of them could be seen as somewhat infantilising of the man who can clearly speak for himself – are torn. If they display the wrong sense of belonging, they will be kicked out. So, they advice the Pharisees to ask their son who can speak for himself.

And so we see the complicated interface between simple concepts that are at the heart of all human gatherings: the quality of the questions we ask, the way we formulate our questions and the way in which we talk about belonging.

At the heart of the whole text is a man whose story is not believed. People deny that he is who he is. People deny that he has experienced what he has experienced. People deny that he is telling the truth. He is, in his body and self, the site of controversy. He is responding to the full truth that he knows, and in turn he is treated in a way that becomes the shibboleth of true orthodoxy.

It is a recipe for scapegoating. It is a recipe for exclusion. It is also a recipe for the abdication of responsibility and self reflection. Such dynamics can be at the heart of every human gathering – especially among creative, dynamic, well intentioned gatherings of people. How a group respond to an individual whose life or circumstances or narrative challenges the group's belonging or viewpoint is a test of the integrity of the group's belonging.

Response

God of groups,
You are within and beyond all of our borders:
our names for you; our words about you; our gatherings and stories.
We seek to praise but sometimes we imprison.
May we always be curious about what is beyond our borders,
going there gently, knowing you have always been there.
We ask this because we know that you are within and beyond all of our stories.
Amen.