

## I WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE

John 9: 1-41

Marilyn and her husband couldn't have children. So, they decided to sign up for adoption. They more than qualified in terms of their suitability. Eventually, an opportunity came up: a blond haired infant boy. They were thrilled. His name was Shane. But within the first year they noticed something was wrong. Shane's mobility and motor movement seemed awkward. The medical professionals ran all kinds of tests. Finally, they discovered something. The boy had Muscular Dystrophy, a condition that would only get worse with time. From being able to walk, even run and play sports, Shane would eventually end up in a wheelchair. Eventually, none of his muscles would work and eventually, he would die. Would he live past his twenties into his thirties? It was all so uncertain. And what about the mental health reality of a slow but steady deteriorating condition that was fatal? How would Shane face that? What about his parents?

Well, the adoption agency was called to task. They had claimed they had done all the medical testing and had told the couple Shane was completely healthy. Now they offered to take him back. Marilyn refused outright. Shane was given to them as a gift from God. They would give him the best life possible and they would find their fullness and joy as parents.

But were they all on the same page? Within a few years, Marilyn's husband left and didn't return. In a note he said that he just couldn't bear to parent a child who would eventually die. But Marilyn's attitude was different. You don't choose what falls on your lap all too often in life. What you do with it, though, and how you respond can make all the difference. Turning a problem into an opportunity and what seems like a curse into a gift... now that's transformational. But before I tell you any more about Marilyn's journey with Shane, let's dive into our scripture reading in search of some revelatory insight.

Jesus and his disciples encounter a man born blind. Now before we go any further with this story let me say that sickness as described in the gospels is different than sickness today. In Jesus' world there was no modern medicine. People suffered from all kinds of ailments for which there would be treatment, medication and medical therapy today. Furthermore, a lot of the medical conditions people suffered were highly psychosomatic and trauma related. The people were living under brutal kinds of oppression and much fear from authorities who never hesitated to use violence and threat of violence to keep people submissive in a system with rules they set up for this very purpose. Even as they may have deceived themselves with the idea that God had given them their power and authority, the experience on the ground was different. Those with power and privilege may persuade themselves that the rules and the system is for the good of the masses, but those who are the victims of the system see things very differently.

In our reading there is a brilliant use of metaphor to offer a powerful message. There is physical blindness. Who knows why the man cannot see. Is the cause some infection, poor sanitary conditions in his birth, the trauma of what he or his parents have witnessed with their eyes? How many people even in our world today have lost their ability to see because of traumatic events they have witnessed with their eyes and broken down mentally as a result. This story, though, is about how someone who is physically blind is made to see. His sight is part of his spiritual journey to wholeness as much as any physical healing is. He is empowered and filled with hope. He is made free within and he then becomes free to question the system and even those who hold the power. He becomes a threat and therefore Jesus becomes a threat.

On the other hand there are those with power, privilege and authority. They are blind to Jesus and to the God Jesus reveals and embodies. Even though they are supposed to represent God's will for their people, they are blind and impose such blindness on the people by terrorizing them with their rules, their shaming, blaming and violence. In the end, a man who is blind is able to see while those with physical sight are condemned as truly blind.

OK, but what are they, and perhaps we, blind to? There are at least two major kinds of spiritual blindness here.

First, the disciples ask Jesus this about the man: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The disciples live in a world of beliefs shaped by those with power, which declares that those who have trouble in their lives have done something to deserve it. It is a prosperity gospel they teach. Those with the power, privilege, wealth and health are those blessed by God. They have the God-given right to set up the rules of what is right and wrong and condemn those who fail. On the other hand, those who are sick, poor and mentally unhealthy must have sin in their lives or in their background which has rendered them into a bad situation. Rather than compassion for the blind man there is condemnation. Either he or his parents must have sinned for him to be stuck in poverty because without being able to see he cannot work. He is totally dependent on charity, and yet, why give charity and feel sad for someone whose situation is essentially their fault in some way?

And isn't this true in our world today also? How long have so many of us blamed poor people or indigenous people or LGBTQI+ people or people of colour for their health issues, their marginalization and their bad situations? It's easier to blame the victim because that doesn't have to involve any change or overhaul of the system. Keeping things as they are is great for those for whom the system is working just fine. The need to change it is only urgent for those who see how bad it is, how unjust it is and how sinful it is.

So then, what does Jesus have to say about the blind man? Before he actually does something to empower him for healing, he has to address the flawed theology that helps him and his

disciples stay trapped. If the thinking doesn't change and if the believing doesn't change, we ourselves can't change. Empowerment and transformation is a body, mind, and spirit thing in its totality. So then, the blind man needs to be free of the kind of guilt, shame and trauma that's kept him trapped in his blindness and the disciples have to be freed from the kind of twisted thinking that believes he or his parents must have done something wrong for him to be blind. And once they are freed from such thinking, they can challenge a system that keeps them and others down with such shaming, blaming and twisted beliefs.

So, to the question as to who sinned, the man or his parents that he was born blind, Jesus says this: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned..." wow! They are not responsible for the suffering and hardship of the blindness. Wow! And more. "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." And what are God's works to be revealed? Freedom, healing, wholeness, transformation. This man is being called to bear witness to the journey of freedom and transformation, of healing toward wholeness. God is not above like some puppet master deciding who gets punished with disease and tragedy. No. God is the Spirit of transformation in the healing and freedom we can be a part of.

Like Marilyn with Shane in our story, God was never the cause of Shane's MD condition, and God was not the cause of Marilyn having this situation thrown on her lap. No. God was in the opportunity to show courageous and persevering love in a tough situation, to love and empower Shane even as his bodily muscles would atrophy over time. Marilyn was going to empower Shane to live a grand life and try everything – sports, music, travel. She was going to make sure he would live a full life however long he had to live it, and together, they would give thanks. God was in that empowerment. God was in the faith and hope in the power of love. They didn't need to know why some things happened to some people. These are mysteries unanswerable. God is not to be found in philosophical questions like that. Rather God is in the energy of faith, hope and love to transform people and break down systems of oppression.

The man healed in our story is a threat to a system that wants to keep him down. Jesus is a threat because he is proclaiming that the system needs to change, that it can change and that healing and transformation begins when we encounter God as the power of love to transform life rather than a false God who stands above as judge according to the rules set up by those with power and privilege.

And this brings us to our second and last point. If suffering, illness, poverty and tragedy are not divine causes and a judgement upon ourselves, and if, rather God is the power to transform every bad situation into an opportunity to bear witness to the power of faith and hope in love to change, grow, heal and bless the world... then, second, why is it that the religious authorities refuse to see God in this way? Because the system works for them. It serves them. They are willing to keep people down because it works to make them wealthy, comfortable and in control. They don't see how oppressive they are. They refuse to see it.

It's like some of us who are white, male, successful and healthy cannot understand how people of colour accuse society of being so racist or women accuse society of being so sexist, or those who are ill accuse our health system of being so broken, and so on. We only see what we are prepared to see that will make us uncomfortable. We can only see if we are prepared to sacrifice some of our privilege or use it to give voice to those voices marginalized and silenced. If I am not gay or trans, how can I know what it's like to be judged, abused and marginalized by a society that privileges cis-gendered heterosexuality? I need to listen and learn and then I need to use my privilege to stand with others for their empowerment and changing of society. If I am not brown or black or Asian, how can I know whether there is racism that way? If I am not poor or destitute or homeless or disabled in some way needing support to live a dignified and independent life, how can I know what my society is truly like? Am I prepared to change the system even if it means I have to change my perspective and support a fairer tax system and changes to a system that has worked for me but may have to change that way to be inclusive and welcoming of all?

Marilyn not only gave Shane a wonderfully rich life full of community and learning experiences. She also empowered him, as she herself became empowered, to become advocates for the disabled community, to expand access as a human right rather than some charitable act. If we as the privileged in society are not prepared to support those less privileged in the way we set up our systems, how can we call ourselves a compassionate and just society?

Eventually Shane came to the end of his days in his body. I was privileged to be part of his journey to the end... At his funeral there must have been at least 500 people present, including politicians and various officials, recognizing the impact he and Marilyn had made in making society aware of those often forgotten and pushed to the margins... There were dozens of wheel trans buses lined up for a block... The whole community came out to celebrate Shane's life and to say: "Thank you." To quote Jesus: "God's works" were marvellously "revealed" in the lives of Shane and Marilyn. They bore witness to the transforming power of God's love and everyone in that sanctuary felt it!

So what about you and me? We sit in different places of privilege or under-privilege in our society. Each of us has our own story within our families and particular situations that have shaped how we see the world and the systems we're a part of. The issue isn't one of blame or shame for who we are. Rather, the issue is one of sight. What do we see and what do we fail to see? Jesus' concern is not about what we don't see because we are ignorant. As he tells the religious authorities: "If you were blind you would not have sin." Rather the issue is our resistance to seeing, our refusal to see because we are afraid of the responsibility, the guilt and the need to change. "But now that you say, 'we see', your guilt remains" says Jesus. By refusing to see the systemic oppressions in our society we not only give evidence to our blindness, but we are guilty of being blind.

The Shanes and Marylins and many others in our world shine a light to us all, and through them God is calling us ever more deeply to see. The question is, do we want to see? Or are we far too comfortable in whatever blindness is ours?

Prayer: Don't give up on us, O God... keep calling us to follow, Jesus... Keeping blowing at us, O Holy Spirit, until you enter us and we become your instrument, your voice, the hands, feet and heart of Jesus... Amen.