**Once I was Blind but Now I See**

**Cooke’s-Portsmouth**

**March 22, 2020**

**John 9: 1-41**

In the once upon a time of life in Kingston, there were two individuals that everyone seemed to know “of” but very few people truly “knew.” They were known more by description as the “guy in the diaper” and the “guy on the bike.” The diaper guy was a runner seen every day religiously running between Dupont and Barriefield Village. Sometimes he was spotted on King Street, or making his way up or down The Causeway and at sundry points in between. He got the rather unceremonious nickname because when it was warm he would often remove his white tee shirt and wrap it around his waist; his girded loins giving the illusion of a diaper.

The guy on the bike often wore a yellow raincoat and rode a standard bike. Like the guy in the diaper he could be seen on many a city street including crossing the Causeway and on Highway 15 riding his bike and picking up bottles and cans. Many assumed that he was homeless and picked up the bottles and cans to support himself. I never took the time to talk to either one of these gentlemen but many a conversation with a new resident to the city often included questions about diaper guy and the guy on the bike. Turns out the runner is a man named Bruce who was a recovering alcoholic; his religious and long daily run aiding and abetting his sobriety. He worked as a cook and the persons who took the time to find this out about him were the ones who told me about him. The guy on the bike was named Fred and he was not homeless but he did deal with a diagnosis of mental illness and often frequented programs for meals and support. Ironically, he was killed in a car accident and the people who worked with him at some of the programs organized a funeral for him.

I decided to attend because I thought that very few, if anyone, would be there. Perhaps I could honour him in death in a way that I had been dismissive in his lifetime. The room was filled and it was standing room only. One of the presiders could not help but notice how many had turned out for Fred’s funeral and subtly shamed us for being there at his death while dismissing him and making him the butt of our jokes in his lifetime. One other celebrant, a Baptist minister who worked with him in sundry programs, spoke of his intelligence and insight. Sometimes his diagnosis precluded him from conveying his thoughts and feelings with clarity. When they spoke, and she reflected back what she was hearing as an effective counsellor, he would often say, “You are listening but you are not hearing.”

I went to Fred’s funeral for the wrong reasons; and I left ashamed of myself, although glad that I had attended. Both of these men had names. Had a story. They had their very specific and personal reasons for doing as they did every day to maintain balance, health and wholeness but only a select few knew the depth of their existence. For most of us, they were simply the “guy in the diaper” and “the guy on the bike.” We saw them, but didn’t really see them; we knew of them; but did not really know them at all. Rather like the character in the gospel.

He was not called by his name: he was the blind guy who sat at the same place every day and begged for alms. People knew of him; they saw him. Maybe they even put money in his bowl. But we are not apprised of his name or any details of his story. And after he is given his sight, rather than celebrating how wonderful a gift he has been given he continues to be an object of derision. The Pharisees call him a sinner and cast him out. Even his parents distance themselves from him fearing the consequences of the Pharisaic ire.

Rather than celebrating the gift; experiencing their son looking on their faces for the first time they distance themselves a little suggesting that, while he is indeed their son and had indeed been born blind, the Pharisees should ask him their questions directly rather than ask them. He is of age; let him answer your questions. They can’t explain the miracle but do not want to suffer excommunication. The Pharisees could only see threat and ensuing problems if people believed that Jesus was Messiah and became consumed and obsessed with casting a pall upon the gift. They coerce and bully and try to get the man to concede that Jesus is a charlatan; a sinner; and that the healing is suspect. But the blind man will not collude.

The Pharisees can argue all that they like but the unnamed man sees that Jesus is not the adversary of God but is the agent of God. Being unable to convince him otherwise they resort to the only recourse that they have: accuse him of following a sinner and cast him out of their presence. And then a second time Jesus approaches the man; this time to strengthen and encourage him. Jesus affirms that the former blind person has seen and heard the Son of Man, and the ensuing result is faith. The once blind man now sees both physically and spiritually.

John’s gospel is filled with irony. In this text we see the ironical tension between the sighted Pharisees and a man blind from birth. The blind man is encountered by Christ, healed of his blindness and comes to see both with his physical and his spiritual eyes that Jesus is prophet and Messiah. The Pharisees, versed in the Law and sighted with vision, do not acknowledge the healing of the man, or the power and presence of divinity. The unnamed man was once blind but now he sees; the Pharisees continue to be blind because they choose to be.

Barbara Brown Tayler, Episcopal Priest and renowned preacher and author was once asked to share an experience that most defined the person she is today. She responded:

That would be a hard question, even if you asked me for the one experience that defined each decade of my life! But there is a time that stands out because it delivered a lasting truth—one that has stayed true through all the changing circumstances of my life.

I was in my twenties, studying for a graduate degree in divinity without any idea what I would do with it in the end. All of my classmates seemed so much more mature and focused than I was. They knew where they wanted to go in their lives and the steps they had to take to get there. All I knew was that I wanted to know more about God, and that I liked being with people who wanted to know the same thing.

There was an abandoned Victorian mansion next door to the divinity school that had once housed the Culinary Institute of America, but the Institute had moved on and the university hadn’t decided what to do with the property yet. I loved walking around over there after dark, and the top landing on the three-story fire escape was one of my favorite places to pray. I could see the whole city from up there, and no one could sneak up on me without me hearing first.

So on the night I am thinking of, I begged God to tell me what to do with my life—to give me some clear direction I could follow, or at least a nudge in the right direction. I really, really wanted to know what I was supposed to be doing, and I was ready to accept any answer. If God wanted me to go halfway around the world and dig latrines, I was ready to do it. If God wanted me to get a Ph.D. and teach college, I was ready to do that, too. I just wanted an answer—and I got one!—but not at all what I expected.

While I was straining to hear God’s voice, this thought came into my head that I did not recognize as my own thought, because what it said to me was so different from anything I would have thought to say to myself. It said, “Do whatever pleases you, and belong to me.” Since those words were for me, not anyone else, I don’t expect them to hit anyone else the way they hit me, but the effect on me was divinely liberating.

God set me free to do anything I wanted to do, as long as I did it in a godly way. At last count, I have had ten different jobs since then—all of them interesting, all of them offering me the chance to relate to other people in life-giving ways—and thanks to that night on the fire escape, I have always felt like I was in God’s embrace.

As with the healing of the blind man there is a before and after to the God encounter. Once I was blind but now I see. Once I attended the funeral of a man that I had never met because in some kind of arrogance I thought that I was doing him a favour. Heretofore I had seen him. Maybe laughed at him. Might have been curious about him but not curious enough to flag him down and offer to buy him a cup of coffee in exchange for hearing his story. In the same self- proclaimed arrogance I thought that I would be the only one at his funeral. It just never occurred to me that he would have friends who could look past his idiosyncrasies. Never dawned on me that he would be interesting or one who might bless and enrich me if I just took the time to really see him as a Son of God and brother of Christ. I was not the only one who attended his service for the same reasons but we were all subtly called out by the Christological figure at the front of the room who had known him; and loved him; and walked in his shoes; had shared myriad cups of coffee with him; and who was truly saddened by his sudden and unexpected death. It may have been too late for me to get to know him as Fred and not just as the guy on the bike. But it is not too late to learn from my short sightedness.

Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.”

May God continue to open our eyes wider to the blind-spots in our life and living and grace us with new eyes for seeing. Amen.