

The Seeds of Prejudice

March 02, 2008

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

If we immerse ourselves in this story that constitutes one of the *signs* that form the account of miracles in the life of Jesus.....if we imagine ourselves wholly present, watching the drama unfold.....then we have the possibility of experiencing something of the depths of truth John intended for his readers to experience.

The Gospel you just heard (John 9:1-14) is something of a metaphorical double-barreled shot gun. First, there is the story of the blind man whose eyes are opened....the story of one who is able to *see* literally and figuratively after he is healed. His great insight, his *true* vision, is to recognize that Jesus is prophet, Son of God and Lord. The other barrel is a teaching on the healing of prejudice.....equally important as the cure of the man born blind.

Every one of us acts out of our own realities. These realities are largely a matter of social, even religious, heritage, and this *inherited wisdom* helps us deal with

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the world from a particular point of view. In its best form this life orientation gives us a richness of definition and the solace of identity, besides making a complex life a little more simple, a little more manageable.

And therein lie the seeds of prejudice. Making things too simple is why prejudice is different from *pre-judgment*. Prejudice is pre-judgment turned lazy and cold. Prejudice is pre-judgment that refuses to change when confronted with new, more humane knowledge. Prejudice is pre-judgment content with oversimplification rooted in unreality. It is a blindness of the soul. No physician can cure the blind of heart. Someone once remarked that prejudices are like rats and our minds are like traps; prejudices get in easily, but it is doubtful if they ever get out.

The first prejudice appearing in this Gospel is that of the disciples toward God. This theological prejudice is

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expressed in the question: “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he is born blind?*”(Jn 9:2)

These disciples had grown up in a culture that explained physical impairment or disease as a form of divine retribution. We can read about it in the Book of Exodus (Ex 20:5). One of the foremost things that the healing ministry of Jesus was to demonstrate was that God is *not* worse than we are, and *who* among *us* would make someone blind because of the sin of an ancestor? Only someone very sick. That is why, in a very real sense, Jesus was God’s answer to the problem of a bad reputation. Affliction and suffering were not the will of Abba, the Father, but part and parcel of a fallen world that Jesus had come to save. And therefore healing was a messianic sign that the Kingdom of God was defeating evil’s grip on the world. God’s emancipation in Jesus was breaking into the world (Lk 4:18-19), and the release of people from all that oppressed them was the *primary* sign of its authority.

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The second prejudice that is confronted in the story is also theological and is based on the 4th Commandment, and it concerns the nature of the Sabbath. The Pharisees, being experts in the Law, know Exodus 20:8-11 by heart. By healing on the Sabbath, when the cure could have easily been postponed until the next day.....after all the man had been blind since he was born.....by healing on the Sabbath, Jesus is challenging the Pharisees' preconceived notion of the limits of God's activity. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus is showing that the Sabbath is the day, not of recreation, so much as it is the day of re-creation.....the day of liberation and restoration. God doesn't head for the shore or the mountains on the last day of every week and Jesus demonstrates this thought in the healing. Rather God is most at work on the Sabbath since Sabbath acts of charity should reveal in microcosm a foretaste of *Sabbath rest for all eternity*. Jesus tells these

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Pharisees, in essence, that their God is too small.....a prejudice that all people of faith must deal with, lest we reduce the mystery of God to what we think we can control.

The third prejudice appearing in this story is the attitude toward Jesus.....that he could not be the *light of the world* (v. 5b), because he is a *sinner*, an accusation evolving from his violation of the Sabbath (v. 16). The prejudice here.....and again it is one of the favorites of self-righteous people of all faiths.....is that because someone is not *righteous* according to **our** standards, God *will not and/or cannot* use them to accomplish his Divine will. This rigid insistence that there is only one correct and acceptable understanding of who was a righteous person, combined with the limitations placed upon God's relationship with the *unrighteous* constitute a boundary that Jesus breaks down throughout his ministry among us.

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Walking along, Jesus saw a person to be healed; the disciples saw a theological problem to be solved. Jesus recognized an opportunity for God's works to be revealed *while it is day*, and the disciples saw a way to lay blame. Jesus found in this a chance to transform evil; the disciples found an opportunity to talk about it. Jesus viewed the man in terms of the future; the disciples viewed him in terms of the past. Jesus saw redemption; the disciples saw guilt.

Our theological straight-jackets can be unzipped by this story. We should remember that God has only had **ONE** flawless Instrument through whom to work in **ALL** human history. The one criterion Jesus laid down for discipleship was **not** theological correctness.....it was the capacity to lay down one's life for the sake of the Gospel. In other words, on our Final Day, we will not be asked how good and untainted we were in this life. We more likely will be

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asked to show what scars we took on and carried for
the sake of our Jesus Christ, our Lord.

AMEN.