



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Blind and Not Even Knowing It

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 30, 2014
The Fourth Sunday in Lent—Based on John 9:1-41*

The man was blind as a bat and had been all his life. Though he was always around, no one really saw him. Had someone asked the daily passersby about him, they might have said, "Oh, yeah, there is a blind man who sits at that corner. I couldn't identify him necessarily, but I am pretty sure he is usually there." They didn't spend much time wondering about why he was blind. Their religion provided them an answer: disability, illness, misfortune—all of it—occurred at the hand of God, meted out as some sort of response to sin, either on the part of the individual or of those who came before him or her. There is a long tradition of that kind of thinking: People who are blessed are good; people who are less fortunate are not—they are bad people or lazy people who bring it on themselves. It is a tidy system that keeps us who are "blessed" feeling really good about ourselves; over time, it even begins to convince us that we truly are entitled to the abundance in our lives.

Jesus, of course, would have nothing to do with such foolishness. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," he said; "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." I frankly doubt that Jesus actually said that last part about the man's blindness existing as a great opportunity for a miracle. John, on the other hand, would certainly imagine Jesus making that claim. One of the narrative conceits in this gospel was to present a number of signs to demonstrate John's extremely exalted Christology, his high view of Jesus' divinity and equality with God. What seems more consistent, though, with what is known about the life of Jesus the man is that he healed where he saw need, not to complete an agenda or to make a point, but to live the life to which he was called. Jesus seemed much less concerned with explaining life than with living it. The disciples said, "Master, here is a blind man. What does it mean?" Jesus said, "It means that here is a blind man before us who needs to be able to see."

Like us, the disciples were interested in causation; we are wired in such a way that we desire and, to be honest, in such a way that we need to understand causation. We want science to do that—to learn all it can about what causes what. But in the world of religion, seeking to assign causation with great clarity and specificity is at the least a very slippery slope. Two thousand years later, we are not totally free of the issue about which the disciples asked Jesus. If we listen carefully to some of our rhetoric, we hear a subtle message (and sometimes one that is not so subtle) that if we'd only be more centered, less anxious, more this and less that, we wouldn't be sick—sick with everything from cancer to heart disease. For the record, as one who has known an anxious day or two in my life, simply telling us who are anxious to stop being anxious so we won't get sick does not have a high rate of success. It is sort of like reminding those of us who are not skinny and on occasion eat French fries that we shouldn't. We know but thanks.

The real question is deeper than just these obvious examples. A huge part of religion is devoted to helping us understand the world, particularly to understand how it is that some appear to live in a cloud of never-ending blessings while some don't. Even the word "blessing" is a complicated one. If we believe that we are blessed with abundance—health for us and those we love, meaningful and loving relationships, adequate or even more than adequate bank accounts—then do we believe that those who are not blessed with such abundance are less deserving than we? Are they in fact the opposite of blessed, which is cursed? Theological language is dangerous when it claims more than it can give. Do we ever think how it must feel to hear us expansively praising God for our being so "blessed" when so much of the world clearly, in that understanding of blessedness, is not?

Though this is terribly popular in church quarters, I am much more comfortable with a shorter and more theologically neutral word to explain how most things happen: luck, plain luck. It is a notion, which for what it's worth, has the backing of scripture. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that the sun rises on the evil and the good, that the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous, a statement which purports a natural randomness in the world that defies the kind of overarching divine control of events that our language seems to suggest. The mudslide in Washington miraculously, we say, stopped short of some homes in the affected area, while wiping out some next door. In the tornado's path each year, we see this again and again—one home saved, another lost—one home, one family "blessed," another not.

Do we really mean that? Some say absolutely yes—and they are not bad people. They say that they were saved because God wasn't ready for them yet or because their work was not done. And though I grind my teeth when I hear such comments, I generally keep my mouth shut. In fact, the longer I live the more I believe that saying less is generally a great deal better than saying more, particularly in religion. In the information age we seem to believe that we must opine on everything; and though fighting that wave is moving against the stream, I will make the argument every day (even when I act otherwise) that loving more and saying less is the way to go and that what we truly need in every case is what we truly have: the presence of God.

The saddest characters in this story from John are the Pharisees; they were the truly blind people. Though I love to beat up on them, as they are such easy marks, I need to remember from time to time that we are more like them than I find comfortable. They were the keepers of the *cultus*, hanging on to what they believed they were to live by: the law. It seems so ludicrous to us that they'd truly object to this restoration to sight simply because Jesus had performed the feat on the Sabbath. We pride ourselves—and, I think, rightly so—on our radical welcome and our commitment to open communion; but we are not there yet, having our own blind spots—sometimes big blind spots.

Just over a week ago the Rev. Fred Phelps died, ending at least his part of an era. Mr. Phelps was the proud grandfather of a particularly virulent form of homophobia about which he gained more notoriety than either the smallness of his message or the number of his followers could truly justify. They blamed everything wrong in America on the "gay agenda." Their practice was to show up at funerals of note and many other gatherings bearing their trademark signage, "God Hates Fags." It was so hurtful and unspeakable that what should have been a mere blip on the screen received a lot of attention.

When the Rev. Mr. Phelps died, there was a fairly short-lived outburst of hateful comments on various social media sites, celebrating his death and wishing for him a long and miserable existence in hell. Hate, it seems, begets hate. It was not an encouraging sight to behold—people on *my* side of the argument becoming (or perhaps they/we already were) as bad as he was. I had to admit that I found this man despicable; and though I am way too proper to ever say it in the vile ways some did, I was pushed by this story about Jesus and others like it to think about it. Could I have prayed for him more and cursed him less? No doubt. Could I have been less dismissive of him? Probably not. But what his death and the reaction to it have reminded me of is how easy it is to dismiss those with whom I disagree—and most not nearly as objectionable as Fred Phelps.

What I am sure of is that we are all blind—and only God can make us see.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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