

"SEEING AND BELIEVING"

Last Sunday's gospel lesson from John 4 and today's gospel lesson are really long ones, so today I'm letting you remain seated for the reading. This morning I am not going to read through the whole gospel lesson at once. The story in John 9 is written in seven scenes. I'm going to read each scene separately and then make comments.

In each scene, there are only two characters, though sometimes a group (Pharisees, neighbors) functions as a single character. As we shift scenes one character stays on stage. The other character changes.

I. THE STORY

A. Jesus and the Blind Man

Scene 1

"As Jesus 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." [9:1-7]

- The disciples want to find out who is at fault for the man's blindness, but Jesus doesn't blame the blind man. Jesus is only interested in healing the man.
- The story doesn't say that the man asked Jesus to heal him. Jesus takes the initiative. The blind man simply obeys. [understated]

[Jesus exits]

B. The Blind Man and his Neighbors

Scene 2

"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.'" [9:8-12]

- The man's neighbors can't believe their eyes. If you or I had been present we also might have had difficulty believing what had happened. The neighbors want to know how it had happened.
- The man testifies. He gives witness to what Jesus has done. Yet finally he admits that he does not know where Jesus is. It's interesting that the Greek word for "knowing" (oida) is connected with seeing. The man says he does not know. He does not see.

[Neighbors exit]

C. The Blind Man and the Pharisees

Scene 3

"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.'" ***[9:13-17]***

- The Pharisees are not happy about the miracle. They should be delighted, but they're interested only in attacking Jesus. They condemn Jesus for breaking the sabbath law. Jesus is identified as one "*not from God*" and as "*a sinner.*"
- The Pharisees can't agree among themselves. Some see the sign done by Jesus and are curious about it. Others see only Jesus, the sinner. When they ask the man to give them a clue as to Jesus' identity, they are not really interested when the man answers, "*a prophet.*"
- The Pharisees actually have nudged the man toward a statement of faith in Jesus. His identification of Jesus as a prophet is one step closer to perfect spiritual vision. . . Now the Pharisees change their tactics.

[Blind Man exits]

D. The Pharisees and the Parents

Scene 4

"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.' [9:18-22]

- The cast of characters is narrowing. No longer is there division among the accusers of Jesus. All remaining Jews are enemies.
- The Jews do not believe the neighbors or the man who had been blind. They turn to the parents who state only the facts. The man is their son. He was blind, but now he sees. This is of no help to the Jews. They should now admit that the man had been blind. Yet they adamantly refuse to accept what is before their eyes.
- The parents say nothing about Jesus, because they are afraid. They understand the dire consequences of support for Jesus, . . . expulsion from the synagogue! The man now stands alone. [Parents exit]

E. The Blind Man and the Pharisees

Scene 5

"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 (Jesus) 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. . . 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." [9:24-30,32-34]

- There is irony in the words of the Pharisees when they again talk to the man. They say, "Give glory to God." Paul Duke writes, "The Jews invoke the name of God to deny the work of God;

they command the man to speak the truth, and in the next breath prove they are closed to the truth; emphatically they shout what they know and prove their utter ignorance." (Irony . . . , p.121)

- The phrase "give glory to God" is used in scripture as an admonition to honesty. In Joshua 7:19, for example, we read, "Joshua said to Achan, 'My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and render praise to him; and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.'" Achan then admits he has kept the spoils of war, hiding them under his tent.
- There is a strange twist in our gospel lesson. Neither the man nor Jesus is a sinner who needs to make a special confession. It is the Pharisees who need to confess.
- The man for a second time states the facts. He was blind, but now he sees. The Jews have asked him three times how he received his sight. What do you suppose is the tone of his voice when he says to the Jews, "Do you too want to become his disciples?" Does he speak naively, actually believing that they want to become believers, or does he speak sarcastically, trying to shut them up? Whatever the case, they are angry with his answer!
- The Jews twice say, "We know . . ."
"We know that this man is a sinner."
"We know that God has spoken to Moses."

Yet they do not really know God.

The man says, "Here is an astonishing thing!

You do not know where he comes from."

[Knowing and seeing are interchangeable.]

The Jews do not know. They do not see. They are blind.

- And which person is the sinner? Certainly Jesus has broken the sabbath law, but he can do this because he is from God. According to Jesus' redefinition of the law, a sinner is not a person who breaks the sabbath, but a person who refuses to believe in Jesus.
- Now the Jews turn against the man. They say he was born in sin. To them blindness is evidence of sin. The irony is that he now sees, so his blindness can no longer be seen as God's judgment.
- The Jews have prodded the man first to declare that Jesus is a prophet, and now they prod him to become a disciple.
- Jesus has been offstage for a long time. Now he returns.

[Pharisees exit]

F. The Blind Man and Jesus

Scene 6

"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, '. . . 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." 9:35-38

- The man has been cast out of the synagogue. For a Jew, this is the ultimate rejection. [The Jewish Christians of the 1st century were cast out of the synagogue, and this caused much suffering.]
- The gift of sight solves one problem, but it creates another. The man is now on the outside, but he does not blame God. In fact, he is quick to respond when Jesus approaches him.
- The Jews have prodded the man toward faith. First the man confesses that Jesus is a man, second a prophet, third from God, and finally that he is Lord. In the 6th scene he confesses faith and worships Jesus. He is a follower, a disciple. He believes.
- Finally we have the answer to the question, "*Where is Jesus?*" He is on the outside, - with those who have been cast out.

[Blind Man exits]

G. Jesus and the Pharisees

Scene 7

"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.'" [9:39-41]

- Paul Duke says: "*The man's rise to belief, . . . his progress upward seems at least partially assisted by the downward plunging Pharisees... The theme is clearly trial & judgment. The Pharisees begin by trying Jesus in absentia. When the evidence upholds (Jesus), and their star witness defends him, they ... pronounce Jesus guilty and put the man on trial, whom they also find guilty and condemn to exile. Jesus' appearance then vindicates the man and reveals ... that it is the Pharisees who have been on trial."*

(pp.124-126)

II. THE GIFT OF VISION

- A. For 3 weeks - gospel lessons have contrasted physical and spiritual.
1. Nicodemus thinks Jesus is talking about physical birth (born again) but Jesus is talking about spiritual birth (born from above).
 2. The Samaritan woman at the well thinks Jesus is talking about physical water, but Jesus is talking about spiritual (living) water.
 3. The Pharisees focus on the restoration of a man's physical sight, but Jesus is concerned primarily about spiritual sight (believing).
 - A blind person who believes is better off than a person who has perfect physical vision but does not believe.
- B. Eyesight is a gift. The blind man did not ask to be healed. Jesus simply decides to give him physical vision. In the same way, God gives spiritual vision, which we call faith. It is a pure gift of God.
- C. The believer's life is not necessarily easy. The first Christians were no longer allowed to worship in the synagogue. Friends and family abandoned them. Believing in Jesus does not make life easy.
- D. Our vision is clouded if we look only for glory and not for the cross. Jesus suffered. He stood on the outside with the poor, the rejected, - the blind. Jesus calls us to join him in standing beside these people. May we have eyes to see and the courage to follow.

Let us not only SEE. Let us BELIEVE. AMEN.