

Face-to-Face With Jesus: Seeing, Sin and Salvation

John 9: 1-39

March 2, 2008

Recently while going through an airport during one of his many trips, President Bush encountered a man with long hair, wearing a white robe and sandals, holding a staff. President Bush went up to the man and said, "Aren't you Moses?" The man never answered but just kept staring ahead. Again the President said, "Moses!" in a loud voice. The man just kept staring ahead, never answering the president. Soon a secret service agent came along and President Bush grabbed him and said, "Doesn't this man look like Moses to you?" The secret service agent agreed with the President. "Well," said the President, "Every time I say his name, he just keeps staring ahead and refuses to speak. Watch!" Again, the President yelled, "Moses!" and again the man stared ahead. The secret service man went up to the man in the white robe and whispered, "You look just like Moses. Are you Moses?" The man leaned over and whispered, "Yes, I am Moses. But the last time I talked to a bush, I spent 40 years wandering in the desert!"

Our Lenten journey is forty days, not forty years; and I am not sure I would recognize Moses face-to-face. But in this Lenten series we are considering those face-to-face encounters brought to us by a set of gospel texts that show various characters encountering Jesus face-to-face. This week we have the encounter in John of a man blind since birth encountering a healing Jesus. I have entitled this encounter and how it speaks to us – *Seeing, Sin and Salvation*.

There were two major ways of seeing God in ancient times. The first was what I call a kind of “spiritual blackjack.” It saw God as a kind of Las Vegas card dealer, holding all the cards and the holding the outcomes at the blackjack table. Our fate was predetermined by the hand we were dealt and the way those cards were shuffled. We only had the power to say, “hit me” with another card or “I’m staying put.” This fatalistic worldview has been extended in the Enlightenment through the writings of Nietzsche, characters like Faust, and novels from writers like Thomas Hardy. It echoes much of the sentiments of polytheistic times when the Gods played above our heads with little or no concern for humanity.

The second way of God is a kind of “spiritual bulimia.” God becomes an angry God who looks to catch us in bad behaviors. Sin is the bag of bad behaviors that we carry around in the world. If this bag gets too heavy, we need to confess them, make restitution with God and we can then reclaim our relationship with God. Our lives become little more than binging and purging of sin, making an angry God even angrier and then pacifying God with our confessions. With that theology, our starting point is our sin before an angry God. Healing comes through penance doled out by the great Judge. The best visual of this bag of sin that we carry around is depicted in the character of Rodrigo from the movie *The Mission*. Rodrigo is a thoroughly bad man, a slave trader in South America. His profession is to travel the jungles of his countryside searching for and capturing natives and then selling them into slavery. He is a brutal man. In returning from one of his missions, he finds that his girlfriend has fallen in love with his brother. Filled with violent jealousy, he challenges his weaker brother to a duel and quickly murders him. Rodrigo becomes disgusted with his life and murderous behavior. He

hides out in a Jesuit monastery, starving himself and waiting to die. He is persuaded by the Jesuits to seek confession and redemption. He then takes another mission trip into the jungle with his heavy bag of armor of the conquistador (like a bag of sin) slung over his soldier. He tries to scale the wet, jungle mountain again and again. Each time he falls back becoming muddier and dirtier each time. Finally he scales to the top of the beautiful jungle peak. He finds a plateau where he rests, exhausted. On that plateau there he finds the tribe of natives from which he has captured many men and savagely sold them into slavery. But this tribe has converted to Christianity. The tribal leader sees him and stares at him in recognition. He sends his second in command, wielding a large dagger over to Rodrigo. He then nods a signal to the lieutenant to use the dagger on Rodrigo. Just as you think Rodrigo will be a dead man avenged, the lieutenant uses his dagger to instead cut through the rope of his bag of sin. Rodrigo is surrounded by this tribe of new Christians, and embraced by forgiving love. Martin Luther finally concluded that we could never know all of our sins before God, much less confess them all. We must simply accept the love God offers us.

I am convinced that most people walk around today with these ways of seeing planted in their brains. Some are fatalists. They have given up on life and God by saying that they are no longer responsible for the outcomes of their lives. They feel that God is so distant or indifferent to their lives that all they can do is somehow appease God with bargained promises or begging prayers. They may have grown cynical to the evil powers surrounding them. Others walk around with a pervasive sense of guilt. Their lives are out of control – they live destructive lives in which they are continually harming themselves and others out of selfishness. Once the threshold of hurt gets to the point

where the pain of guilt gets so high, they pour out in confession those sins and they vow to live different lives for a while. Ultimately the cycle repeats and they become just as beat-up and beat-down. Yet slowly their self-esteem is damaged or even crushed.

I see these worldviews as particularly hurtful in the GLBT community. Some have heard for so long that God hates them and that the Scriptures condemn them, they simply check out on the religious community altogether. They see a fundamental oxymoron in the term “gay Christian.” This homophobia becomes internalized, and that their spiritual life is hopeless and predetermined, a kind of blackjack that always ends up in a bust. For other GLBT folk, the oppression takes the form of walking around as spiritual bulimics forever bingeing and purging their sin. Each time they come to the Communion rail to silently confess and feel reconciled. This reconciliation is good at some level and certainly therapeutic; however it stems from a Calvinistic view that something is just wrong about whom they are.

But Jesus, when we see him face to face, gives us a third worldview.

John’s gospel teaches us that union with God, to come face to face with the divine, is not based on what you’ve done or who your spiritual DNA or genealogy runs through, but solely on accepting God’s grace given through Jesus Christ. The starting point is not our sin; the starting point is God’s rich grace for God’s children. Becoming disciples starts not with doing good stuff, but in simply being the creatures that God has designed you to be. This is the essence of this story of the blind man on Jesus’ path. His blindness was not a result of his parents’ sin or his preexistent soul sinning before birth. He just turned out blind. What is important says Jesus is the power of God to work goodness in this terrible situation.

It is important in this story to look at what came before and after the story. This encounter is wedged between two intense arguments between Jesus and the Temple authorities. Just before this scene Jesus utters perhaps the most blasphemous claim of the New Testament: “before Sarah and Abraham were, I am.” He echoes the words of Yahweh in this claim and they lift rocks to stone him. Right after it, he argues over the spiritual blindness of the religious authorities and utters the great “I am” statement – “I am the Good Shepherd” and I am the “sheep gate.” What Jesus claims is that it is not important to claim your religious heritage. It is not important that you are a seventh generation Methodist or a eighth generation Lutheran. What is important is that you know the great “I AM,” that is Jesus is central to your life. Your life is not predetermined by your blindness or sight, by your social standing, by your sexual orientation. Your life, says Jesus, is open-ended, and based upon your relationship with me. What is important is not what you have done, but what God has already done for you. When you grasp this huge idea the response is gratitude. This provides liberation from our past and protection against arrogance in the future.

So what does this mean to us today? Our spiritual life begins in the understanding of God’s work, not ours. This means that we must become students of God’s work in history and in reflection of God’s continuing work in our lives. To understand God’s work in history we need to become literate in the history embedded in our Bible and in the traditions of the church. These two sources are God’s autobiography. Without a basic knowledge of these two great sources, it is very difficult to gain an appreciation for what God just might be doing in our own lives. At the same time, this is not just a knowledge journey. It requires quiet time in conversation with God to ask how these

movements of God are moving in our own lives. We gain that understanding in individual prayer and in conversation with others in the faith community. Those activities produce a sense of God's presence in God's continuing story with God's people.

The second meaning emerging from this face-to-face encounter with Jesus is that our response of gratitude is to channel our energy into God's work all around us. Of course we will slip from time to time. We will suffer temporary blindness. We will wander away from the Shepherd. But God's vision will return to us. The key is to stay busy with God's work. The fruit of that work will be joy and even more gratitude. And gratitude is the best insurance against guilt, shame and further wanderings from the Shepherd. Once we feel gratitude we also develop a healthy self-esteem. This is not arrogance. This is the esteem like that of a child who knows she is loved and nurtured by a doting parent. Keep working and joy will be a constant companion.

We must finally recognize that all around us is spiritual bulimia and spiritual blackjack. They are alive in the world today. Our task is to resist succumbing to them by separating ourselves from their spokespersons. Think of the blind man now healed. He spoke up for Jesus in the face of the spiritually blind. And what happened. He was cast out of the synagogue. He was cut off from his former spiritual community. But he affirmed his faith in the Chosen One, in the Christ. Friends, they can kick us out of the church, but they can never EVER pull us from the arms of Jesus. Remember that as we now pray...

