

Seeing and Believing **(John 9: 1-41)**

Back when I made a living practicing law I really enjoyed trying a case to a jury, especially as a defense attorney. Juries are generally predisposed to trust the State who is bringing the case against the citizen who has been accused of breaking the law. They are, by nature, skeptical. More often than not, it was an uphill battle for defense attorneys because not only did the State have unlimited resources they also had the option of dumping a case if it looked weak and there was a chance they might lose. The State hates to lose at trial. They loathe being shown up.

I remember a DWI case I defended when I was in private practice in Tyler, Texas. My client had been out on the town and got pulled over for a very minor traffic offense, enough to warrant a traffic stop. The officers detected the odor of an alcoholic beverage on my client's breath which triggered a DWI investigation. There were two officers on the stop with one being the training officer and the other just out of the academy. They also had an in-car camera recording the stop and subsequent investigation. I watched the video tape and to the untrained eye it did appear that my client was impaired. The question was whether or not he was impaired to the point where he couldn't safely operate a motor vehicle. That would be determined by how he performed the standardized field sobriety tests.

That's where my prior training as a DWI Task Force sergeant came in handy as I had been trained in the gentle art of standardized field sobriety testing and I could tell the officer was in trouble from the very beginning of the battery of tests. The whole point of standardized field sobriety tests is that they are standardized and if done correctly you can rely upon what we called the clues of intoxication. After the State of Texas got done presenting her testimony and playing the videotape for the jury I went to work dismantling the case. After getting the officer to admit that the parking lot was not level, full of potholes and patches, and that she didn't use one of the parking lot stripes as a point of reference I pointed out all the mistakes she made into question thereby undercutting what she had seen with her own eyes and throwing her opinion on the impairment of my client into doubt. Her testimony had been sufficiently impeached and there wasn't much the prosecutor could do to rehabilitate her. Seeing, in this case, wasn't necessarily believing.

And it's seeing and believing that the Apostle John is writing about in our gospel reading for this morning. The Pharisees had a problem with some pretty incredible eyewitness testimony that they needed to discredit if they were going to maintain their hold on power.

John records for future generations an amazing and dramatic miracle story of a man born blind who was not able to see but got his sight thanks to Jesus. The healing of the blind man was the fifth miracle performed before witnesses and served as an opportunity for God's work to be revealed. It also demonstrated the divisions such a conversion can cause because, even today, people refuse to believe in and accept the healing powers of Jesus Christ no matter how irrefutable the evidence.

John starts out by telling us that as Jesus and his disciples were walking along they came upon a man who had been blind since birth and one of the disciples asked: *Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, the man or his parents?* This may seem a little harsh and judgmental but it was a common belief in the Jewish culture of the day that calamity or suffering was the result of some great sin. There was no other explanation. But Jesus seized upon the opportunity to use the man's suffering to teach about faith and to glorify God. Jesus responded: *Neither he nor his parents. This happened so that God's mighty works might be displayed in him.* Jesus continued by telling his disciples that while they have the time they must do the work of the one who sent him. He said that night is coming when no one can work and that while he is still in the world he is the light of the world. At that point Jesus spit on the ground and made a mud poultice and applied it to the man's eyes. Jesus then instructed him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The man did as instructed and returned with the ability to see. Those that knew the man were puzzled with some believing he could now see and others believing it was someone who looked like him. When asked how it was that he could now see he told them about a man called Jesus who had made a poultice for his eyes. When asked where this man called Jesus was he responded that he did not know. What is significant here is that the man had apparently not heard the stories of the miracles already performed by Jesus or his teachings which, to me, means he had no hidden agenda.

At this point they took the man before the Pharisees who asked him to tell them what had occurred. Rather than be amazed at this healing the Pharisees focused upon the fact that this poultice healing miracle was done on the Sabbath which was a violation against unnecessary work performed on the Sabbath. Some of the Pharisees said: *This man isn't from God, because he breaks the Sabbath law.* Others said, *How can a sinner do miraculous signs like these?* So they were divided. When asked by the Pharisees what the man thought about the one who healed him he replied that the man was a prophet. Doubting the man's story about being blind the Pharisees sent for his parents who confirmed the man as their son who had indeed been blind since birth. They said they did not know how he came to see and told the Pharisees to ask him for themselves. The parents were afraid to say anything more out of fear of being cast out of the synagogue because it had been decreed that anyone confessing Jesus as the

Christ would be expelled. At the time religious ostracism was a severe matter and the parents would rather have avoided it but if you read between the lines, I think they had heard about Jesus and were putting two and two together.

Not getting anywhere, the Pharisees called the man back to see if his story was consistent and told him to give glory to God because they know the man who supposedly healed him is a sinner. The man responded: *I don't know whether he's a sinner. Here's what I do know. I was blind and now I see.* Undeterred they continued to ask him the same questions looking for a discrepancy. At this point the man snapped back and asked if they wanted to become a disciple of Jesus too. Offended by the temerity of this man they insulted him claiming that he might have been a disciple of this rabbi but that they were disciples of Moses who they knew spoke to God and that they don't know where this miracle man came from. Having heard enough the man expressed how incredible he thought they were being in that they didn't know anything about who did the healing but he was healed nonetheless stating: *God listens to anyone who is devout and does God's will. No one has ever heard of a healing of the eyes of someone born blind. If this man wasn't from God, he couldn't do this.* Not being what the Pharisees wanted to hear, they expelled the man.

When Jesus heard about this he sought the man out and asked him if he believed in the Human One to which the man asked who that was and that he wanted to believe in him. Jesus responded: *You have seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you.* John tells us that the man said he believed and worshipped Jesus. Jesus then said: *I have come into the world to exercise judgment so that those who don't see can see and those who see will become blind.* There were some Pharisees there who heard what Jesus said and asked: *Surely we aren't blind, are we?* Jesus said to them, *If you were blind, you wouldn't have any sin, but now that you say, "We see," your sin remains.* That had to sting. Spiritual blindness to the presence of God's Son is affirmed as the ultimate sin.

The transformed man bears a simple witness, a witness the Pharisees could not poke any holes in, a witness that could not be discredited or impeached. The controversy between the man born blind and the religious leaders represent the heart of the conflict about Jesus as word of his teachings and preachings spread: Is he a sinner or the one sent from God? The fact that Jesus opened the eyes of one born blind shows that God is with him. God doesn't hear the prayers of unrepentant sinners. The only explanation, the one the Pharisees refuse to accept, is that this man Jesus is from God. It all boils down to the fact that the Pharisees' skepticism was based not on insufficient evidence, but on jealousy of Jesus' popularity and his influence on other people. Jesus was not one of them and he certainly was not from a place or family they

expected the Messiah to come from. The Pharisees were shocked that Jesus thought they were spiritually blind. Jesus was saying to them that it was only their blindness in the form of stubbornness and stupidity that could excuse their behavior.

The message for us, to those who are still mired in unbelief, is to remain open and recognize how sin has truly blinded us and others from knowing the truth, that he gave spiritual understanding and insight to those who were willing to have their eyes opened. Believe and see.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, how we praise you for the blessed assurance that Jesus is ours and that our unmerited relationship is but a foretaste of glory divine. Move us by your Spirit to show others what a life in Jesus Christ can be like so that their eyes too will be opened and they can clearly see the truth of your gospel. Give us the words, courage, and opportunities to speak truth to power in a world consumed by selfish ambitions that bring harm to the weak, powerless, and disenfranchised. May we be the voice of the voiceless and the ones who bring to the light those who are blind and want to see. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.