

The Man They Didn't See
John 9:1-16

A little while ago, my wife and I decided to go to lunch. We went to a certain restaurant, not too crowded, and proceeded to eat our lunch.

Susan decided at some point that she wanted a refill on iced tea. She's a Southerner, so I'm sure it was more glucose than tea, but that's beside the point. Anyway, our server was no where to be found. Servers here servers there, but where was ours? We waited, and waited, and waited. Susan would take a bite, chew on an ice cube, all the while hoping for some more tea to appear.

And as I, more and more irritated, cast my eyes around the restaurant to see the wayward waitress, to my chagrin I realized that I didn't remember what she looked like. Which one was she? She had greeted us, taken our order, brought our food, brought me another coke, but I didn't know which one she was.

And my irritation at her led to a little disappointment in myself. Here she was, a person doing her job, if not perfectly, who had talked to me, served me, and I hadn't bothered even to remember what she looked like.

As if she were invisible to me. There but not there.

Similar in its own way to the time I was given instructions to a church member's house in rural Northampton County. The lady told me, go to the stoplight in Gaston, turn right, mine is the seventh house on the left. Turned out it was the ninth house. When I mentioned this to the lady who had given me the directions, she said, "Oh, blacks live in those first two houses beside the light." And so they were invisible to her. Not worthy of a second thought. They were invisible to her. There but not there.

And like the waitress and those folks living in the first two houses, the blind beggar is also unnoticed, overlooked. Until Jesus comes to town. And restores his sight.

But after his sight is restored, look at the reaction of the crowd. They could have been me at a restaurant. Almost humorous. Is this the guy who was blind? Yes. No. I think so. I'm not sure. Looks like him.

Neighbors, and get this, those who had seen him before, did not recognize him. How many times had they walked by him, maybe thrown him a coin or two, but his life was of so little import to them, they couldn't really tell. He was indeed the man they didn't see.

It wasn't that the man had changed so much that they didn't recognize him. It was that they had never really noticed him in the first place. Given him a penny now and then, but they had never given him their care or concern.

Well, why not? Their excuse was, that he was a sinner.

Were you surprised by what the disciples said when they encounter this man? Jesus is walking along, and comes across this blind man, sentenced to be a beggar all his life, because back then there was nothing else of a blind man to do. And the disciples . . . The disciples! Followers of Jesus, learners from Jesus, ask a wrong question, as wrong as any question ever could be: who sinned to cause his blindness? Did he or was it his parents? What a wrong attitude to have.

They assume the man's trouble comes from sin. And because they write him off as a sinner, they write him off as well. No care, no compassion, no, can we spare a dime. They just wanted to walk on and leave him behind in his sin, in his blindness. How disappointed Jesus must have been. They refused to see this blind man, that is see him as a person with hopes and dreams, see him as a person for whom God cares.

All they saw were his perceived sins. Because he was blind, they wrote him off as a sinner, and therefore wrote him off completely. Call him a sinner, and then you don't have to deal with him. He's getting what he deserves, anyway. That was the attitude.

Jesus will have none of this belief system, and neither should we. It is simply not Christlike to assume that it is God who causes another's misfortunes. And, as we should never assume that God punishes sin by striking people blind, we should never assume that God is one who notices another's sins, but never notices ours.

Jesus in fact brings to us a new understanding about God. People in trouble are no longer seen as sinners condemned by God, but as opportunities for the people of God to love, to transform with God's redeeming and merciful love.

This man's sin, his parent's sin cause his blindness, so then we can write him off? No, he is a man for whom we should have compassion. He's in trouble. To follow Christ is to be ready to offer what help we can when we encounter people who are walking in darkness, whether it be emotional or spiritual, moral or physical.

And Jesus, of course, has the power to offer much help indeed. And, the symbolism is unmistakable: Jesus is the light of the world, and today he will take away the darkness from this blind beggar's life.

As if to say: you don't really see until you see the power and mercy of God alive in Jesus.

And more symbolism as well: go wash in the Pool of Siloam, which means "sent. " As if to remind us that Jesus is the one who is sent? I think so. And why the spit and dirt to make mud? I think we are invited to consider again how humanity's creation is depicted in Genesis, that we are formed from dirt, clay.

And if in God's power we are formed, it is in Christ's power that we are re-formed, restored, renewed.

But then what an ending to our Scripture lesson. The healing has created quite a commotion. And the crowd isn't really sure if this is the same guy. Yes. Really. I am the one. I'm the guy who has begged here all my life. I'm the one. Blind, but now I see. Well, incredible. How were your eyes opened? This man Jesus, touched my eyes, told me to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash (and yes, there's some symbolism lurking there as well), and I did, and now I can see.

And as we read further, we learn that this healing leads to an ironic confrontation. You would think all would rejoice that this man was healed, but in fact quite the opposite. Some are offended.

It turns out that all this had taken place on the Sabbath, and so by healing on the Sabbath, technically Jesus has performed work, and therefore according to the Law, has sinned, because you weren't supposed to do any work on the Sabbath. How foolish! Instead of marveling at a miracle, and rejoicing that one born blind can finally see, the religious leaders look to the Letter of the Law and proclaim Jesus a sinner. Called him a sinner because he did something wonderful but on the wrong day.

The leaders call upon this blind man who now can see to denounce Jesus as a sinner, but he refuses. And so they get angry at him as well.

And the incident ends with Jesus finding the man, revealing himself as the Son of Man (as the savior), and Jesus marveling that those who found fault with his giving sight to the blind on the

Sabbath are themselves so blind.

For years, they hadn't really seen this blind beggar in the midst; and now it is Jesus himself they do not see, do not recognize. And so a question hangs in the air: which blindness is worse, the inability to see rocks and trees, or the inability to see who Jesus as he is, the one who offers the path to life worth the living, life abundant and eternal.

So, what's the message in all this? Maybe more than one.

A reminder that to follow Christ is for us to see, to truly see, the needs and hurts of those around us. As Christ's people, we must not write anyone off, ignore anyone just because they are different, or just because we think they brought it on themselves.

A reminder that we must not ever let condemnation be our final attitude even to those we consider sinners. If you think about it, condemning sin does nothing to make us more righteous. It just makes us brittle and uncaring and cold. It makes us unChristlike.

And, a promise, for when we feel burdened by the world or our sins or by life itself. And the promise is this: Christ sees us. And invites us to enter into life in his name. That as we believe, as we trust that in him God's love shines forth, that God indeed wants what is best for us, no matter what we have done or where we have been or in what condition we find ourselves, in Christ we will find that life worth the living.

In closing. That blind beggar. He couldn't see anyone. But the crowd never even noticed him enough to see what he really looked like.

And the leaders, confronted with the wonderful healing, the miraculous restoration of sight, choose not to praise Christ for life he brought, but chose to condemn him because he acted contrary to law and custom.

The crowd did not notice the blind man. And the leaders could not see Jesus for who he really is.

It makes us wonder: who is it, in our Scripture this morning, who is truly blind? Amen.