

One Thing I Know

Back in the glory days of Vince Lombardi, when the Green Bay Packers ruled the NFL, the team suffered a rare defeat at the hands of the Detroit Lions. Not only was it a loss, it was an absolute humiliation. The Packers were totally dominated in every phase of the game.

A Packers lineman once said of Lombardi, "Coach treats everyone the same. Like dogs." Not surprisingly, then, when the team met for practice the next week, the players braced themselves for a vicious tongue-lashing followed by a brutal practice.

Instead, Lombardi calmly stood up and said, "After watching that game, it's obvious this team needs to get back to the fundamentals." He pulled a ball out of the equipment bag and said, "Gentlemen, this is a football."

Of course, Max McGee had to pipe up, "Slow down, coach, I think you've lost some of us."

Today's Gospel is about slowing down, getting back to the fundamentals, the very basics of faith that can get buried under the complexities of competing theologies, philosophies, and ideologies

This is one of my favorite stories in the Bible, and this unnamed blind man is in my top five of favorite characters. I wish the Bible would give names to these people. Always referring to him as "the man who had been born blind," as the Gospel does is like having to refer to a singer as "the artist formerly known as Prince." It's just awkward.

This man's utter innocence and earnestness in the face of evil is priceless, and leads to one of the most wickedly funny verbal slams in the Bible. There is the irony that this man who has had the gift of sight for only a few hours has already seen more than those who have had sight all their lives.

Best of all, this simple, unpretentious man displays a practical spiritual wisdom that is so desperately needed in today's world.

There is nothing funny about the story as it begins. We are confronted right off the bat with a heart-breaking demonstration of the burden this man has had to carry all through his life.

I'm not talking about living with blindness in a world that made no accommodations for such a disability, as difficult as that must have been. I refer, rather, to the emotional abuse inflicted on him by Jesus' disciples: *"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*

There is the assumption that his condition is a result of his moral failure. That was the common view of disabilities in Biblical times; they were God's punishment inflicted on sinners.

Every day of his life, the blind man has had this judgment thrown in his face by pretty much everyone. He is bad person, unworthy of God's mercy. There's no hiding it; everyone who looks at immediately thinks: whoa—blind guy, wonder what he did to deserve that.

This assumption is so ingrained in people that I don't imagine the disciples even lowered their voices when they asked their question. The guy is sitting right there and yet they point at him and speak of him as if he were not a real person but an object lesson.

The disciples strip all the humanity away from this lonely, suffering man. It doesn't seem to occur to them that he has feelings.

The only hint of compassion among these supposedly devout followers of Christ is the suggestion that maybe it's not him who is such a loser; could be his parents' fault. But either way, the blind man is nothing to them but a visual aid for a theological discussion.

In Jesus' world, however, compassion always takes precedence over human-created conventions, especially when the conventional wisdom is as half-baked as this. He quickly dismisses their judgmental question, and gets to work healing the man, with whatever he has available, and in this case, saliva and dirt is all he's got.

When the man follows Jesus instruction to wash at the pool, Jesus quietly slips away. He's nowhere to be found when the blind man gains his sight, leaving the whole city in an uproar as they try to make sense out of what just happened.

"Wait a minute! Isn't this the blind guy who used to sit here and beg? What happened!"

“Nah, it couldn’t be—it’s just somebody who looks like him.” What does it tell you that no one is able to put a name to this man who has been among them for years, and they’re even not really sure what he looks like.

“No, it is me,” says the formerly blind man, and he reports exactly what happened to him. The confused people bring him to the authorities, and from here on, the story becomes a lengthy and profound exploration of the subject of blindness.

The authorities, the people with the expertise, training and resources, miss what is obvious to anyone with a heart. Something glorious has just happened. A suffering child of God: blind, scorned, and shamed since the day of his birth, has discovered that he mattered to someone.

Miraculously, he has been given new life. He has been given the gift of sight. This is a time for awe and wonder, for praising God, and for joyfully celebrating the moment.

Yet somehow the authorities miss it. Somehow, they can’t see it. In the midst of a miraculous outburst of healing and new life, all they see is a crime scene. *What? Somebody healed on the Sabbath? That’s terrible. We need to find this villain and lock him up before he heals again.*

The authorities are so blinded by their own hatred and ideology that cannot see how ridiculous that sounds. They are so blind they can’t even recognize their own hypocrisy. At the same time that they are condemning Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, they are also claiming Jesus didn’t heal anybody. The blind man wasn’t really blind!

They subpoena the formerly blind man’s parents and try to pry this admission out of them. But to their disgust, the parents meekly confirm that their son was born blind.

We then learn that the investigators have prejudged the case long before it occurred. They ask, “If he was born blind, how can he see now?”

The parents know the answer. But they are afraid to admit the truth because the authorities long ago made it clear that anyone who says anything good about Jesus will be kicked out of the Temple. So they cop out, saying, “Ask our son. He’s an adult.”

The Pharisees are incensed that facts are getting in the way of their opinions. So incensed they are totally blind to the truth. For them it’s a case of, who are you going to believe—me or your lying eyes?

We now know that there is no possible testimony or facts that will convince them of what is in plain sight. Desperate to salvage their investigation, the authorities haul the formerly blind man back for a second interrogation. This time they aren't going to risk getting answers they don't like. Instead, they lecture and intimidate this fellow with their superior knowledge and status.

It worked with his parents. It has worked with a lot of the crowd. The authorities bear down on the man with all their wiles and rhetoric and powers of persuasion and peer pressure to turn black into white and white into black. To spin a wonderful healing into a crime, and to make the compassionate healer into a criminal.

But the subject of their interrogation has dealt with blindness all his life. He knows the sorrow and the consequences of failing to see what is right in front of him. He, above all people, recognizes blindness when he sees it.

And having received at last the gift of sight just hours ago, he has no intention of ever willingly blinding himself to reality.

When the Pharisees press him to confess that Jesus is a sinner, he does an extraordinarily wise thing. He doesn't waste time engaging them in a debate. For all he cares, the experts can debate and argue and rage and pound the podium and incite the people discussing the intricacies of Sabbath law until hell freezes over.

He freely admits that he's not an expert in law, religion, theology or morality. "I don't know much about all that," he admits. "But here's what I do know. I was blind, and now I see. And there is nothing you can do or say to change that truth."

When they continue to press him about Jesus, looking for weak spots to attack, he asks, "Why do you keep asking me all these questions about Jesus? Is it because you want to be his disciples, too?"

The spluttering from the Pharisees who grow purple with rage at being mistaken for Jesus disciple wannabes, must have been comical. They don't want to be Jesus' disciples; they want the man destroyed. The fact that the formerly blind man, in his innocence, doesn't even know he's insulting them, makes it even more devastating.

In their anger, they shower abuse on the formerly blind man, and insist that Jesus is a bad man. Again, the formerly blind man keeps his cool. Their arguments have no effect on him because he knows what he experienced. He had been blind. He had been

an outcast. He had been labeled a sinner, rejected by God and doomed to live his life in darkness and shame.

Then Jesus came and changed all that. Because of Jesus, he can see. Because of Jesus, he now knows that he has value as a person. Because of Jesus, his burden of shame has been lifted. What he knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, is that the world has become an infinitely better place ever since Jesus walked into his life.

“That’s the one thing I know, and it’s for certain,” he says. “If you can look at that reality and say that Jesus is a terrible person who opposes God and shouldn’t be allowed around decent people, then you live in a different world than I do.”

Of course, his words only make the authorities angrier. Blinded by rage, they try to undo the good that Jesus has done for the man. They try to shove him back into his cage of shame by reminding him, “God made you blind because you’re such a miserable excuse for a human being. You are so far beneath us; who are you to tell us anything? We have the answers; you don’t”.

With that, they drive him out of the community. Jesus hears of this and comes back into the picture. He invites him back into community, a community that the Pharisees, because of their blindness, refuse to join.

The recurring lesson of this story is that while Jesus can give sight to the blind, it’s a much more difficult task to give sight to those who are determined not to see.

Jesus can bring light into the dark places of the world. But as John 3:19 observes, there are people who like darkness rather than light. Getting them to embrace the light is a task that even God finds challenging.

This story about a blind man who can see, and sighted people who cannot, has some interesting implications for us today.

I have often been asked in recent years, how do I engage in a discussion with people who don’t believe what I believe? How do we talk with Christians that don’t believe the same things we do, or who think the ELCA is evil? You could even expand this to: How do we engage in political discussion with someone whose view is totally different than mine?

This story from John can save us a lot of frustration and direct it to positive energy. The first question to ask is, "Am I dealing with someone who is willing to discuss or someone whose only goal is to convince me they are right?"

Loving the Lord with all our heart and mind means being willing to educate ourselves to deepen our faith and understanding. Loving our neighbor as ourselves means being willing to engage in open and honest discussion based on reason, facts, logic, and experience with those willing to dialogue.

But as the formerly blind man discovered, you cannot reason with people whose only goal is to convert you. Converters will use whatever means, fair or foul, they can to win. If this means arguing that up is down and down is up, they will do this. If they have to lie, so be it. There is literally nothing you could possibly say that would change their mind.

Like the Pharisees in the story, they will choose blindness over light if that's what it takes to convince themselves they are right.

The best response to that is to say, as did the formerly blind man, "We can argue philosophy, ideology, politics, theology, and doctrine until the cows come home, and it won't change either of us. Here's what I do know:

"When Jesus was asked by John's disciples why they should believe in him, he did not give a sales pitch or a campaign statement. All he said was: "What do you see? Look at what is happening around me: The blind see, the lame walk. Lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."

"I have looked around. And I have seen Jesus have exactly the effect he described. This is the truth I know. Without this truth I would be stumbling blind and lonely in a hostile world. When I forget this truth I stumble blind and lonely in a hostile world. Without this truth, our world stumbles blind and lonely in a hostile universe.

Christ has come to liberate, to heal, to raise up, to give sight, to give life. That is what I have seen. That is what I know. And I pray to God that my life clearly reflects that so that those who are willing to see may see."

The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.