

BLIND FAITH

John 9.1-25

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“Slow down.”

The choir is giving us good advice this morning.

I have an American Baptist colleague, Kirk Byron Jones, who has written a book about how we have become “addicted to hurry.” Hurry is an addiction, I think, because it feeds on itself so that we try to go faster and faster, only to discover that we can never go fast enough. That’s why we say things like: “The hurrier I go, the behinder I get.”

When hurry becomes a chronic condition, Jones writes, when we run even when there is no reason to, when we rush while performing the most mundane tasks, it may be said that we have become addicted to hurry.

One of the reasons I am on this special Lenten diet is not just about *what* I eat but *how* I eat. I eat fast. It’s not uncommon to be sharing a meal with someone who looks over at my empty plate and says: “Boy, you made quick work of that.”

For me, eating has become just another project best accomplished quickly so I can get on to all the other things I need to do. I know it’s not good for me. I know it has a negative impact on my health and my well-being. But I can’t help it because what I am really feeding by eating so fast is my addiction to hurry.

So one of the steps in recovery from this addiction, Jones says, is to *savor*; to cultivate “your own sacred, savoring pace.”

Along with my Lenten diet, I am trying not to get up in the morning and just go rushing off to do all the things I need to do but to sit myself down in my chair and to savor that first cup of coffee. And it doesn't really matter if that means the day goes better or not. It's not about efficiency. It's about breaking this addiction to hurry.

I was telling the Adult Learning class this morning that the great Bible scholar, Walter Brueggemann says: "Lent is a time to quit running, to let ourselves be caught and embraced in love."

I am not preaching to the choir this morning. The choir is preaching to me. Slow down. Quit running. For God's sake and your own, break that addiction to hurry that keeps you from savoring life. Let yourself be caught and embraced in a love that has been there all along if only you will slow down long enough to feel it.

Slow down.

That's also good advice as we come to the story for this morning from John 9. The truth is, people can be in a real hurry in their rush to judgment.

Right now, people in our government seem to be in a big hurry to blame poor people for poverty and sick people for illness. They seem to think that everyone experiences poverty or illness as a failure of their own responsibility. Which is frightening when you think about it because how far are any of us from screwing up just badly enough to be without the things we need for life?

Even if we know better, we are addicted to making "snap judgments" about that homeless person on the corner or anybody, for that matter, who looks different from us.

The story for this morning begins: “As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?’”

That was fast. Without any information about who this man is or how he got there, they rush to make a judgment about this man and his parents.

And you might notice that these disciples are much more inclined to talk *about* this person than to talk *to* him. They don’t ask *him* about his life. They ask *Jesus*, as if he is just a handy illustration of all those questions they have about the connection between sickness and sin. He is not a person to them but a metaphor for their own spiritual inquiry.

Just like recovery from the addiction to hurry is to slow down and savor life, so recovery from the addiction to “snap judgments” is to slow down and to take the time to listen to people.

I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. But that’s not the point because it’s not about what you know. Like hurry, “snap judgments” can become an addiction. We know better but we can’t seem to help ourselves.

So the choir is right. Slow down.

When the disciples see the circumstance of this man who has been blind from birth, they are in a hurry to make a judgment about who sinned. And Jesus says, in effect, “Slow down: this isn’t about anybody’s sin.”

John 9.3-25

³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. [Now I have a lot of questions about this but I’ll deal with that later.] ⁴We must work the works of the One who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no

one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then the one born blind went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The 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?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” The one who was blind kept saying, “It’s me; I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He 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.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the religious leaders the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the religious leaders 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.” ¹⁶Some of the leaders 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.

¹⁷So 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.” ¹⁸The people 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 ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but 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.” ²²His parents said this because they were afraid; for the people had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be

Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴So 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 is a sinner.” ²⁵The blind man answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

This poor guy. Every time I read this story I think of the lyrics of that old feminist hymn:

*Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened
Sometimes I wish I could no longer see
All of the pain and the hurt and the longing of my
Sisters and me as we try to be free
Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened,
Just for an hour, how sweet it would be
Not to be struggling, not to be striving,
Just sleeping securely in our slavery.*

It has, as a matter of fact, been pointed out that this man never asked to be healed. The whole point of his healing seems to be to demonstrate how blind everyone else is. It's the worst form of “blind faith,” which is to believe something regardless of what you see.

The disciples believe the blind man or his parents must be sinners regardless of what they see or don't see about his life.

The religious leaders believe Jesus is a sinner regardless of what they see of his power to heal.

The people insist on believing this poor guy must be somebody else regardless of seeing him and hearing his own testimony.

I get it that this is about how the healing of this blind man is a demonstration of how blind everyone else is.

But when I hear Jesus say: “he was born blind *so that* God’s works might be revealed in him,” I think, my God! You mean this guy spent his entire life being blind just as a strategy for God to demonstrate how great God is and how blind everyone else is?

I have some deep questions about how that works.

But if you ask the man born blind, apparently he will say: I don’t know about all that; all I know is that “once I was blind but now I see.”

What saves this story for me is the blind man himself. I am inspired by his persistence and his refusal to let himself get squeezed into other people’s definitions of his life. “It’s me,” he keeps saying. Just because people have never known me as anything other than that guy who used to “sit and beg;” just because people might have been more comfortable continuing to see me as that blind person; just because people moved on from calling my blindness sin to calling my healing some kind of sin, doesn’t mean that I am willing to give up my identity and my testimony. “It’s me; and all I know is that once I was blind and now I see.”

All the attempts to explain how it happened or why it happened will ultimately fail. There is only one thing he knows: “I once was blind and now I see.” And if people will slow down long enough to hear it, he’s more than willing to tell his story.

In fact, what happens next is that he does continue to tell his story and to face off with the religious leaders who are determined *not* to believe him and they get so frustrated with him that, the story says, “and they drove him out.”

He was fine as blind guy and the object of their pity. But the minute he can see – the minute he can see himself and *their* blindness – the people and the religious leaders drive him out.

I don't have to tell you, how many times this story could be told by lesbian, gay, bi, and transgender folks. For some religious leaders and communities, those folks are just fine as long as they are seen as damaged and in need of healing – as the objects of pity.

But the minute those lesbian, gay, bi and trans folks can see – the minute they are no longer blind to their own beauty, the minute they start telling their own stories about who they and who they are created and called to be – then those religious leaders and communities want to drive them out. Everything is fine as long as everyone is willing to stay blind. But the minute people start to see, then the game is over. Then the deal is off. Then the legislation begins.

Thankfully, the man who was born blind and now can see was driven out right into the arms of that community of Jesus that welcomes him and his story and this new ability he has to see.

Thankfully, when I was driven out because finally I could see, there was community that welcomed me and loved me and believed in me more than I had the capacity to believe in myself.

My testimony as I stand here before you today is not that I understand it or can explain it; all I know is that once I was blind but now I see.

When that rough, rugged, cruel, slave-trading John Newton wanted to write his story about amazing grace, he borrowed this line from the blind man in John 9: “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see.”

You know the story. And maybe you are uncomfortable with singing that “wretch” part, but Kathleen Norris reminds us that the word isn't about moral failure. It means “an exile.” It means someone who knows what it is to be driven out; to be lost; to be given up on and to have given up on yourself.

Norris says, “I suspect that anyone who has not experienced wretchedness – exile, wandering, loss, misery whether inwardly or in outward circumstance – has a superficial grasp of what it means to be human.”

I get why it is that you might want to change “a wretch like me” to “someone like me” or “a soul like me.” But for John Newton and for the one who was born blind and for me, our testimony is that we know what it means to be driven out. And we can’t tell the story of amazing grace without you – without you singing John Newton’s song or telling the blind man’s story or welcoming me.

The thing that made the one who was born blind “wretched” was not his blindness but his ability to see. It was when he could see himself and the blindness of others that they drove him out. And his story wouldn’t be complete without: “Through many dangers, toil, and snares, I have already come; it’s grace that brought me safe this far, and grace will lead me home.”

Sing whatever you want this morning. But John Newton and the blind man and I will be singing about the kind of amazing grace that can save someone who knows what it is to be wretched and what it means to find our way home.

And if you can see that this morning, if you can hear that voice calling you to slow down and to come home, well then, please, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The anthem for this morning, “Slow Down,” is by Edwin T. Childs. Kirk Byron Jones, *Addicted to Hurry: Spiritual strategies for slowing down* (Judson Press, 2003). Walter Brueggemann’s Lenten devotional is *A Way Other Than Our Own* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), p.32. “Sometimes I wish” was written by Carole Etzler. The story of John Newton and “Amazing Grace” has been told in many forms. One of the most powerful historical-contemporary versions can be found in T. Wyatt Watkins’ *How Sweet the Sound* (Judson Press, 2001), pp. 187-201.