

None So Blind

In this week's lectionary Gospel reading, we return our attention to the metaphor of light; of Jesus as the light of the world, of his gift of physical light to the man born blind, of his light that was rejected by the spiritually blind Pharisees. I often think that we should pay special attention to Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees. They were, after all, the devoutly religious persons of their day. They weren't the ones who subverted their religion to their quest for temporal power, as the Sadducees apparently did. They weren't like the Zealots, the fundamentalist terrorists of their day, who would slit the throat of a Roman soldier in the name of God, killing to rid the Holy Land of foreign contagion. They weren't heading off into the desert, creating separatist religious colonies of the ritually pure, as the Essenes did then and bizarre, fringe religious groups still do today. No, the Pharisees were a good deal like us – serious about their religion, striving to make sure it had an impact on their everyday lives. They wouldn't cut anyone's throat, though they certainly wouldn't hesitate to "cut" anyone socially who didn't fit in with their ideas of what was appropriate. They didn't withdraw into enclaves of purity, but they didn't associate with just everybody, either. They sound to me a lot like any number of serious-minded, 21st-Century American Christians.

More to the point, I suppose, they remind me of me. Of me when I get complacent about my spirituality, of me when I get comfortable about my place in God's Kingdom. It's so easy for me to go from "God loves me despite my failings," which is true, to "God loves me because of my strengths," which is a good deal less true, to "The strengths for which God loves me make me superior to others," which is patently false. But when I look down my nose at others because I think I have more of the light than they do, then I am falling into the same trap that ensnared the Pharisees. They were so sure that Jesus couldn't be anything to do with God because he didn't emphasize the same Scriptures that they did, didn't "do church" the way they did. They took the smallest part of the light that they had received from God through Moses and made the careful precepts of the Law and the fence they built around it into the focus of their lives. Meanwhile, they missed what even they would have agreed was most important. Matthew and Mark both tell the story of the Pharisee who asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher..."

But if the Pharisees had really been focused on loving God and loving neighbor, would it have bothered them so much that Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath? Would they have cross-examined the man and his parents and abused the man for not giving the answers they wanted? They would not see and they would not hear because they were lost in the darkness of arrogance and assumption, arrogantly assuming that they were the people and that wisdom would die with them, as Job so famously characterized his so-called "comforters." That darkness is one I know, perhaps one you do as well. It is so easy when we are surrounded by so much evidence of God's love and bounty toward us to begin to assume that we somehow deserve it more than those who are without; that there must be something wrong with them or they would not be lacking. It is so easy to catch a tiny flash of the truth of God and to arrogantly assume that we have the whole shining light in our grasp, under our control.

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But we don't see the whole light. None of us are capable of it. None of us can encompass within ourselves the wholeness of God. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, now we see through a glass, darkly. We shall not see the glory of God in whole, we shall not know as we are known, during this life. We must always remember that no matter how much of the light we may have, there is always more. And we must always remember that, just as God made the ultimate revelation of God's own self to humankind through an insignificant peasant in an obscure land, so will more of God's light come to us through the most unexpected channels, in the places where we expect it least, from those whom we would never believe could teach us anything.

My brain's been pretty foggy this week, thanks to the cold or virus that I've been fighting, so I don't know how much light I'm shining on this subject, you should pardon the expression. But I do know that this is what God has put on my heart for today. That as we carry on our journey through these Lenten lands, through the darkness that seems to dominate this world, we must be always on the lookout, everywhere, for those flashes of the light that will help us find our way. And we can't just look for them in the places or from the faces that we would expect. If we do not allow ourselves to be blinded by the world's paradigms and prejudices, we will see God's light from those least like ourselves; from those who are too conservative or too liberal, from those who are too rich or too poor, from those who are too smart or too dumb. If we really watch for God's light, we will find it in the gays and in the homophobes, in the illegal immigrants and in the Minutemen, in the eggheads and in the rednecks. We must stand ready to receive slivers of God's light from all of our neighbors and to embrace and love them because they carry that light.

Matthew Henry was a non-conformist English clergyman whose Complete Commentary on the Bible was originally published in 1706 and is still in use today. In his remarks on the Book of Jeremiah, he wrote, "There are none so blind as those who will not see." At the end of the ninth chapter of John, Jesus says, in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, that he has come into this world "so that those who do not see may see," but also, he adds, "those who do see may become blind." The Pharisees, as usual, are incredulous. "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." We have rightly claimed this morning, with great joy in song, that the light of Jesus has given us our sight. Indeed, it is true, but we cannot forget that the gift of light carries with it a calling to walk in the light, to live our lives in love for our fellow human beings, for all of creation and for our Creator. The first epistle of John says, "if we walk in the light as God himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." We are called this morning, my sisters and my brothers, to be in fellowship, in communion, with each other, with all who are the Church around the world and with all those who God loves. As we come to the rite which recalls this communion, let us come to the table of Jesus in full knowledge of our former blindness, of our blind spots that remain, and of the great love of God through Christ which washes us clean and heals our brokenness. Thanks be to God.