

Blindness—Belief; Sinfulness—Sight

Toss those terms back and forth around an abstract discussion table and they sound quite clear

You see it or you don't. You sinned, or you didn't. You're a believer or you're not.

Take those terms out on the street, however—

where roles and relationships are complex and conflicting

where struggle is constant, and suffering inevitable--

put those notions in the rough and tumble of real life, and matters get sticky.

What do we see; and how does that blind us?

What do we believe; and might those convictions be occasions of sin?

All the other Gospel writers include stories of Jesus healing blind men.

None present him as a medical magician

All of them employ these healing stories as signs of God's power over both physical and social disorder.

In each of their stories, Jesus responds to a direct, urgent plea for help.

John tells a very different story: Jesus *inflicts* sight on a poor guy who doesn't ask for it—

sight that shatters the man's well-functioning social order.

Blindness—Belief; Sinfulness—Sight: Which is which? And what's with that?

Storyteller John seems to mess with our minds—flip them around on a martial arts mat

to throw us off balance—make our heads spin

Put it another way: John confronts us with a rigorous challenge to religious imagination.

As we said at the start of Lent, imagination can be misfocused.

It can create distorted worlds that imprison those who envision them.

Today John zooms his camera in on four tragic cases of tunnel vision:

- The disciples: Their imagination only allows bumper sticker answers to complex and agonizing questions about guilt and suffering.
Who sinned? This man or his parents? It's gotta be one or the other!
- The man's neighbors: Their imagination identifies the man only by means of his established social role.
Is this the guy who used to sit and beg? No way—can't be! He's not begging!
- The man's parents: Their imagination can't venture beyond than their own security.

*lose too Sorry, Son, you're on your own here! We can't get involved. We'd
much!*

- The religious movers and shakers: Their imagination comes to a screeching halt at the STOP sign of behavioral regulations
If he heals on the Sabbath, he isn't from God!

From a distance all these folks seem morally myopic—how could they be so blind!

Observed from up close, however, their beliefs are solidly grounded in good sense.

- Disciples: *You have to see the world in terms of cause and effect. (I do; don't you?)*
- Neighbors: *Who people are can't be divorced from their history of social interactions.*
- Parents: *We can't admit hearsay evidence; and we can't take ultimate responsibility for anyone else.*
- Leaders: *Beliefs without behavioral boundaries are meaningless or dangerous.*

Some of these folks, John tells us, have second thoughts about what they see; but most in the story are “true believers”.

As John sees it, that makes them *sinner*s, because their belief systems, their imagination constructs, cut them off from relationship

Do you ever observe such true believers? One sometimes stares at me from the mirror.

Amid the back & forth of all his camera turns, however, John hones in on someone else:

a man, born without sight, who becomes an imaginational explorer— open to the evidence that opens up for him.

Did you notice? His ability to see does not come all at once:

- He undertakes a rigorous journey, step by step with dogged deliberate discernment.
- Piece by piece he reconstrues the world as he recounts his story, over and over to those who cannot see. (That' *their* problem, but it *isn't his*).

There are two other characters in John's drama—easy to miss, in all the tumult and shouting.

Each brings TO the story the imagination that the man develops IN the story.

Do you see what John is showing us about the character God, and the actions of Jesus?

- *He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him, says Jesus NOT “God made him blind so that I could put on a spectacular healing show”*

BUT: God has determined in advance that any human tragedy can become
an occasion for God's own healing and transforming
imagination.

- **And what response does Jesus make to God's imagination?**

WE must work the works of him who sent me while it is day, Jesus declares, then **he does it.**

He intervenes—with mud and spit—to catapult a man's journey toward new vision.

Jesus stands back and lets the man find his own focus—in his own time, in his own way

Then, when the man is locked out by those who are themselves incarcerated, Jesus reconnects with the man who, at last, has come to really recognize him.

Blindness—Belief; Sinfulness—Sight: WHAT IF?

- **What if "sin" is not primarily (as we often suppose) a moral code violation, but a desperate determination to remain a "true believer"— *What we see is what there is!***
- **What if "belief" has more to do with how we COME to see than what we CLAIM to see?**
- **What if "blindness" comes from staring at the world with beady eyes?**
- **What if "sight" is beholding ourselves/one another through the eyes of God's imagination and then "*working the works of the One who sent Jesus, while it is day*"?**

Such *what ifs* might prove as unsettling to my world as they are to those in John's story.

You may know Gordon Cosby, from the Church of the Savior in Washington DC:

If men and women today began by the thousands experiencing the depths of Jesus Christ in a transforming way, there would simply be no place for their expression of experience to fit into present-day straitjackets of Christianity

You probably don't know my friend Ron Cebik—Deacon, educational psychologist, who has a brain neuropathy that confines him to a wheel chair, and restricts his speech to computer:

Imagination requires a leap into freedom of which some are frightened. But I can only say the Nicene Creed when, for the words "I believe," I substitute "I imagine". Then it comes alive for me.

Gospel writer John isn't available for us to ask him, right now; but, if he's listening in,

I suspect he's nodding and saying: *That's sort of how I see it!*