

NOW I SEE – A STORY OF BRUISED GRACE



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John 9 (selected verses)

9 As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ When he had said this, Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷ saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). The blind man went and washed and came back able to see.

For a second time the Pharisees called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man who healed you is a sinner.” ²⁵ He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶ They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷ He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” ²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, Jesus, we do not know where he comes from.”

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven the man born blind out of the synagogue, and when Jesus found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶ The man answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸ The blind man said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped Jesus.

Thanks be to God for His Holy Word which is given unto us.

My children sent me a tweet this week that is being retweeted around in cyber space. For those of us with the technology, it is the only life we have—life on-line. Anyway, this tweet made me smile and shed a little tear at the same time. The message—“I didn’t really intend to give up this much for Lent.” So here we are, having given up more than we intended, more than we were ready to give up, more than we would ever have voluntarily given up. Yet, here we stand, knee deep in Lent, surrounded by disease and fear, all of us feeling

alone—together in time, yet apart in space, facing the black hole of uncertainty of what tomorrow will bring.

This moment is a crisis—not just a medical crisis or a health crisis. It is a crisis of faith; a crisis of soul. What has hit us between the eyes is the testament of loneliness that most of us live with in this world. We walk on shaky ground, not sure we are worthy of love or grace, all of us feeling alone. We fear that there is no joy that we should expect. We have built facades to keep our doubts at bay—fashioned castles in the sand so that we feel as if we are in control—those castles have been washed away in the tide of this pandemic.

I remember being in Maine when the local seaside community gathered one Sunday morning to bless the fleet as the fishing boats headed out to sea, hoping to find in those mysterious depths, prosperity and grace amid the unknown. Though the canal was strewn with banners, and the local band was playing triumphant music, but there was fear and a few tears in people's eyes. No one could be sure of returning safe and sound. There was also a tangible sense of awe and trembling as those boats and the fishers set out to sea.

David Whyte recalls an old man who lived alone in the Hebrides. Whyte watched the man as he walked every morning beside the sea, among the gray stones and the baying seals. He would take off his hat and press it against his heart in the blustering salt wind and say his prayer to the turbulent Jesus hidden in the water.^[1] “Lord Jesus, come and save me.”

“Everything is stories”, Barry Alverez observes—“that is all that is holding us together, stories and compassion.”

Scripture takes us this morning to a place of story and compassion. There is no crisis when this story begins. It is an ordinary setting—John says Jesus is just walking along when he sees a man who has been blind from birth. This is a gospel theme. Jesus especially notices people who are hurting, the very people who are often in the background – the ones who beg on street corners day after day, who sleep in their cars, and eat in the shelters – these are the ones Jesus notices; the ones the rest of us don't even see.

And his disciples—the disciples who have been very quiet in John's Gospel —these disciples ask him, “Rabbi, who sinned? This man or his parents?” Because sin is the only reason they can think of to explain why anyone would be born blind. Sin is the only explanation they can come up with for tragedy and violence and grief.

Jesus answers them, “Neither,” and for a moment we think at least Jesus is more enlightened than those ancient disciples. We think for a moment that Jesus might have the same sensibilities we have, and then he keeps talking: “he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.” Am I supposed to believe that anyone was born blind, reduced to a life of begging, just so that Jesus might show us he has the power to heal? Am I really supposed to believe the tragedies and maladies in this world are nothing but a setting from which God's power is revealed? Are we disposable parts in a world that is

becoming ever more filled with disposable people? Jesus says that the man is blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. What could that mean?

Here is the story: When Jesus sees the man born blind, he performs one of the messiest miracles on record. Jesus bends down and picks up some dirt, spits on it, molds it into some sort of mud pie and applies it to the man's eyes. Talk about unhygienic. We are meant to see the work of God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Dirt and mud, breath and water—Jesus' work resembles the work of the Creator. Finding emptiness and chaos, God does the messy, necessary work of making order out of disorder and light to counteract the darkness.

Like every sign that Jesus performs in John's Gospel, it turns out that Jesus has performed this work on the Sabbath—the day when only God may work. So Pharisees get involved because they are the ones charged with keeping order in a disorderly world. If Jesus had healed by the power of his Word and the blind man's faith, there would be no 'real work.' The Pharisees would be appeased. But as soon as Jesus mixes up a batch of mud, applies it to blind eyes, and instructs the man to hike to a pool full of holy water—well, there is no doubt about it: Jesus has performed a work on the Sabbath.

Turns out that no one can see what needs to be seen in this story. When the blind man returns with his sight restored, his closest neighbors no longer recognize him and start arguing whether this really is the blind man or just someone like him. The Pharisees try to question the man's parents, and they don't want to get involved. "He is of age. Ask him yourself." The blind man does not know who Jesus is, where he is, or what he looks like. All he knows is his confession of faith: "I was blind, but now I see." That is enough to get him thrown out of the synagogue and the community.

Here is the thing about grace: it never appears the way we plan for it to appear. If it did, it would not be grace. Grace surprises us, overwhelms us, knocks us off our feet, takes our breath away, roughs us up, bruises our egos. I know a woman whose husband has been deathly ill. Three weeks ago, he went into an unexpected coma. The doctors and nurses went into an emergency code response. They were afraid he had already died. They sent everyone out of the room in a flurry, and as she was pushed out the door—afraid she had seen her husband for the last time in this life—she was pushed right into the arms of her father, who lives out of town, but had unexpectedly come to the hospital for a visit. She dissolved in tears of worry and relief all at the same time.

Today, her husband is learning to walk again, his tumors have shrunk, he is able to breathe, to swallow and eat; all things he could not do three weeks ago. No one knows how this story will end, but it is a story of bruised grace: imperfect, unfinished, like all of us are. Still grace, nonetheless.^[ii]

Turns out that the man born blind doesn't need to find Jesus, because Jesus finds him—and here's the compassion that accompanies this story. Thrown out of the synagogue, the man runs out of one place and into the arms of Jesus. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus

asks. “Tell me who that is, that I may believe.” “You have seen him and are speaking to him even now.” Jesus—the healer, the teacher, the prophet—is the one who comes to us from God. And the purpose of the man’s blindness? It has prepared this man for a life lived in faith, love, and obedience. This is the fullness of life that each one of us seeks. This is the fullness that the joys and sorrows of this life are preparing all of us for.

Ours is a religion of salvation. Our faith is in a God who has come to rescue creation from the absurdity of sin, the emptiness and waste of death, and the forces that shatter living souls. We are permitted to hate these things with a perfect hatred and called to work in this moment of time, our bodies and souls bruised by both grace and evil, with charity and compassion that is beyond us, that comes to us from God.

Remember the story of the Jesus walking across the stormy waters?

Everyone in the boat is suddenly wakened by a storm. All hands are on deck, straining against the elements, sure that the end is near... and then they see a distant yet familiar figure far across the water calling to them.

All of us are preparing for that abrupt awakening, preparing for that calling, that moment when we have to say yes. It will not come so grandly, so Biblically. We won’t really be ready for it, despite our preparations. When it comes, it will arrive subtly and intimately in the face of the one you know you have to love. When you finally step out of the boat toward them, you find that everything holds you and everything confirms your courage. If you wanted to, you could drown, but after all the struggle and all the years you’ve had enough of drowning and you want to live and love and you will walk across any territory, and through any darkness... however dangerous, to take the one hand that you know belongs in yours.^[iii]

In a deep, dark world, blown off course by a dangerous wind of disease and fear, how shall we make sense of this time? How shall we be saved? Through the stories we tell, and the compassion we show to one another, and the charity we practice—though our methods are evolving so that we can practice charity from a safe distance. But the Truth remains unchanged: Christians are always learning how to be truthful and authentic—learning how to live in the light of Jesus—so that we can be that light for the world. Amen.

[i] David Whyte, *Essentials*, Many Rivers Press, Langley, WA, 2020.

[ii] Used by permission

[iii] David Whyte, *Essentials*