

March 2, 2008
Isaiah 35:5-10, John 9:1-41
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

Walk in the Light

As the story in John's gospel opens, one thing is certain and beyond doubt: the man is blind. We learn that he has been that way since birth. He lives in darkness. Even though we discover he has a family, he is reduced to begging for food and coins by the side of the road. He isn't even known by name, but by his disability – the blind man. He is marginalized, dehumanized and objectified. He sits in darkness, not saying a word. The disciples even want to turn him into an object lesson about the theology of sin and sickness. Is he blind because of his sin or his parents' sin? How else can you explain his misfortune? Jesus will have nothing to do with the cheap answers that come from bad theology. The story is about the explosion of the light.

John tells us of another certainty. Jesus is the light of the world. In the language of John, this divine light comes into the world to defeat the darkness of the world. This light pierces the darkness of a blind man's world. Dr. Frances Taylor Gench points out that this man does not cry out for help as others do in some gospel stories; he does not profess his faith before he is healed; he is not even carried by friends to Jesus. Jesus takes all the initiative. Jesus heals the man as an act of sheer grace (p. 66, *Encounters with Jesus*).

When Jesus heals the man and shatters the existing order of things, no one is certain of anything. The neighborhood is in turmoil. The neighbors are not even sure that he is the same man, for they really didn't know him except as a blind beggar. They make him tell the story of how Jesus healed him. Unsatisfied, they bring him to the Pharisees, who ask the man to tell the story again. The Pharisees become lost in an argument over whether the supposed healing violated Sabbath laws. If this Jesus worked by kneading the clay on the Sabbath, he could not be from God. The confusion only increases when the Pharisees grill the man's parents about their blind son and the one who healed him. In effect, the terrified parents abandon their son to his inquisitors. The crowds, the parents and even the Pharisees stumble blindly in the dark.

In all of this turmoil and conflict, a new certainty begins to emerge. The man who lived in darkness begins to walk in the light. He begins to see more clearly who Jesus is. At first he knew him only by name as the "man called Jesus." Then he begins to see clearly what the Pharisees cannot see. They call Jesus a sinner, but he calls Jesus a prophet. The Pharisees profess their ignorance and the man who had been healed becomes their teacher. The tables are turned. The questioners are questioned. The man Jesus healed says, "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." While everyone else is shaking with uncertainty, he holds to his unshakable experience of the grace of God. David Rensberger notes:

"The blind man sets the one thing he is certain of, his own experience, against the standards with which the Pharisees confront him... The blind man's God does not live in a book, not even the book of the law itself, but in the act of mercy that has been done to him... The blind man's understanding of who Jesus is emerges from his struggle with those who would invalidate the experience of his own life." (pp. 45-46, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community*)

He begins to walk in the light of Jesus. He gains a new confidence that arises from his experience of being healed. His life experience is his witness.

There was a couple in a former congregation I served who were blind. Pat was blind from birth; Dale had lost his sight at an early age. One year we decided to hold an Easter Vigil before sunrise on Easter morning. At 5 a.m. we gathered in the darkness around a fire outside of the sanctuary and heard the story of Peter's betrayal of Jesus in the courtyard. We lit our candles from the fire and sang as we entered the dark sanctuary. We extinguished our candles and heard the crucifixion story read by the small light of a single candle. Then, at dawn, we went out into the Memorial Garden to hear the story of the first Easter.

In our planning for the service, we had not calculated on how difficult it would be to read the crucifixion story in almost total darkness. We stumbled through the readings. After the service was over, Dale and Pat said that they noticed what a hard time we had reading the scripture. Next year, they would be happy to read the story. The next Easter, we entered the dark sanctuary. Dale and Pat with their Braille Bible read the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. It was a holy moment as we heard the story of the suffering and death of Jesus read through their own experiences of suffering and healing. Even though they could not see, they walked in the light of their unshakable faith in Jesus.

The confident faith of the man who was blind is tested, strengthened and confirmed by the disbelief of the crowd, the abandonment of his parents and the hard questioning of the Pharisees. The one who does not dismiss him, abandon him or fight him is Jesus. They drive him out, but Jesus finds him.

This weekend, Dr. Frank Yates is leading our Festival of Faith on the life and writings of the English scholar and Christian writer, C.S. Lewis. After becoming a Christian, Lewis wrote a book entitled *The Problem of Pain* in which he explained, from a theological and philosophical point of view, the Christian belief in a good and powerful God in the face of human suffering. Twenty years later, C. S. Lewis' own time of turmoil, confusion and testing came after the death by cancer of his beloved wife Joy Davidman. They had been married only a few short years. The question of suffering, which had been a somewhat intellectual problem, became for Lewis a profound personal crisis of faith.

God did not abandon C.S. Lewis in his doubt and grief. In his book, *Miracles*, C.S. Lewis says what a shock it is to think that we are alone in the world and to meet "God, Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband.... There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion... suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He has found us?" (p. 150) Christ found Lewis in the depths of his profound grief.

Jesus found the man he had healed of his blindness and fully revealed himself to him. John tells us that the man calls Jesus "Lord" and worships him. Now that he walks in the light of Jesus, it doesn't matter that they throw him out of the synagogue; it doesn't matter that some think he is half out of his mind. What matters is that his life has taken a new path and he sees clearly what the sighted people who have studied the Word of God all their lives cannot see.

Isn't that the way it is? When Jesus takes hold of a life, heals a life, fills a life, all the controversy in the world only serves to refine and deepen the faith. All around us I see people who walk in the light of Christ, whose faith is strengthened and made stronger by resistance and rejection. When we have experienced the grace of God, it doesn't matter what other people say or what they tell us to do or not to do. When you walk in the light, there is no turning back. You learn to trust your experience of grace and let that experience lead you more and more into the light.

I know a woman in our own community who has taken to heart the teaching of Moses in Leviticus that we are not to mistreat the foreigner among us. Rather we are to treat them as we would treat our neighbors and love them as ourselves (Lev. 19:33-34). Her actions have led her to take abuse, scorn and criticism from others who think of the serious problem of immigration only in political terms. She thinks in spiritual terms. Their rejection and criticism have only made her more convinced that the path she has chosen is the path to the light.

Christ comes into the darkness of our lives with an explosion of light. There is something of the gospel truth that you and only you have experienced. This unshakable experience leads you to the light. From this experience you have something to do, something to give or something to say. No matter what anyone says, this is your calling. All the criticism, the scorn, the indifference of others, cannot stop you. These things can only serve to help you see more clearly what Jesus would have you do. You walk in the light of Christ.