

I don't like today's gospel. You're allowed to say that; you don't have to like everything in the Bible. You shouldn't like everything in the Bible, because some of it is awful. I'd worry about you if you liked the awful parts. By coincidence, this week I was watching a medical drama where a character was having surgery to reverse a temporary version of the permanent disability that I have. The character was going on and on about how she couldn't wait to have the surgery because nothing could be worse than her condition—the condition I'll live with forever. Now, a couple episodes later, she had the surgery and died, but that's not really the point. What hit home for me was how much I didn't like my real-life experience being used as a story line. And today's gospel comes dangerously close to sounding like *God* impaired one man for the entire first half of his life in order to use him as an object lesson for others. I don't believe that's what happened, but you can see how it could be read that way.

Jesus' disciples see a man who was born blind and jump to a common conclusion based on the theology of the day: the man's disability must have been the result of either his own sin or his parents' sin. Jesus corrects them: neither he nor his parents sinned. The idea that disease is a symptom of sin—or demon possession or an imbalance of humors—may seem silly to us, with all the medical knowledge available to us today. But even with scientific explanations for what ails us, in the bigger cosmic picture of why—all other factors being the same—one person suffers and another is spared, that idea that we must somehow deserve our medical misfortunes is still alive and well. I'm a pastor, and I was once told if my faith was stronger I could be physically healed—as if it's my own fault that I haven't regrown organs that were surgically removed. So considering the disciples' first-century understanding of both anatomy and theology, their question isn't as unreasonable as it seems. Yet, they certainly lack compassion as they treat the man like a morality lesson and not like a person.

We also have here a translation problem: the oldest manuscripts we have found do *not* say, *He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him...* by adding a few words for clarification, the scribes ended up changing the meaning of Jesus' response. Jesus says neither he nor his parents sinned...then Jesus shifts the conversation. Jesus does *not* say that the man lived his whole life up to this point without sight, just so that he could be healed as a miraculous sign for others. What would we do with a God who is that cruel? The disciples want to use the man to solve a theological debate; the Pharisees want to use the man to discredit Jesus; the biblical translators apparently want to use the man as a prop to prove a point in the story. But look at what Jesus does with the man:

First, Jesus gives him sight. While the disciples are arguing about whose fault it is that he is blind, Jesus simply helps him see. What a different world this would be if we all were a little more like Jesus, and spent less time assigning blame when people are in need, and more time working to alleviate their suffering. Secondly, Jesus makes it possible for the man to be seen and treated as a person. Society still struggles to see people with disabilities as people first, instead of seeing the disability first. The neighbors and Pharisees were not used to treating the man as a full member of their community; they speak about him, not with him, until Jesus creates a situation where they have to speak directly to him. John says the man's parents are evasive out of fear, but by refusing to speak for their son, they also force the leaders to do what they probably have never done: invite the man to speak for himself instead of assuming that since he is disabled he needs someone else to speak for him; they have to treat him as they would treat any other adult.

Predictably, the man's neighbors are unable to shift their perspective to see the man for who he is instead of who they remember him being or who they are comfortable with him being. They can't rejoice with him for his gift of sight because they are too concerned with the mechanics of how he received it. So they kick him out of the community. And then, Jesus does the third and arguably most important thing: Jesus finds the man and invites him into a life of discipleship. This man lived his whole life in darkness, then received his sight, only to be kicked out of his community as soon as he could finally take part in it fully. But he becomes the only person in the gospel who John describes as *worshipping* Jesus. The one everyone thought was sinful, the one nobody would listen to, the one who gets kicked out...in the end, he's the only one who worships the Son of God.

John's language of light and dark, sight and blindness, are part of the vocabulary of Christian spirituality, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. But the good news buried down deep in this story, down under the miraculous restoration of the man's sight, is that he was always more than a metaphor to Jesus; Jesus always saw him as a beloved child of God—when he was blind, when he received his sight, and when he had been rejected by everyone else. The Lord does not see as mortals see. We might sing about how *we* were lost but now are found, how we were blind, but now we see...but this story really isn't about us. This story is about Jesus, who sees us differently than our neighbors see us, who sees us differently than we even see ourselves; the good news is that Jesus finds us, not the other way around. That's what makes it grace, and what makes that grace amazing.