

Progressive Clarity

March 22, 2020

John 9:1-41

I am not a morning person. I set my alarm for 7 am for all the days I work, and if I can make it to when the alarm goes off, I angrily turn it off. How dare the alarm I set to wake me up actually wake me up, right? As I roll out of bed, my eyes having been open for a few seconds, things slowly come into focus. I see not just the windows, but the bookcase between the windows. I start to make out the shapes of the books of different sizes and widths on the shelves as well as the collection of Beanie Babies on top of the shelf. I have just enough clarity to be able to get to the door and not have to fumble around for the doorknob. I then have just enough clarity to make it to the kitchen to turn on a light to better navigate the rest of the house, feed the animals, feed myself, etc. Sure enough, just as the light turns on, everything is in focus, the light burning my eyes now as they are forced to rapidly adjust to the new amount of light, and I feel temporarily blinded. This progress to clarity is applicable not just in getting to the coffee maker in the morning, though.

Recall for a moment the last time you were really mad. In the moment, you feel your anger boiling in your veins. You want to yell at whoever or whatever did you wrong. You want the world to know that you're angry and not to cross your path in this moment. However, do you do it? Do you kick and scream like a child? Probably not. In all reality, you more than likely take a step back, cool off, reassess the situation, and over time, you come to a more reasonable reaction, one that maintains a certain level of harmony. This progression from animalistic anger to clarity can happen over a few seconds, an hour, a day, maybe longer, but it still happens. Like all good things, this clarity comes progressively, after a certain period of time, and we see this reflected in the reading for today by three different parties.

The first party we see reflect this progressive clarity (or lack thereof) is the Pharisees. They strictly uphold the teachings of Moses, but these new teachings from Jesus and his followers simply cannot be. Anyone who admits faith in the teachings of Jesus is thrown out of the synagogue. Hence the reason the parents of the blind man say, "He is of age. Ask him." In essence, they are throwing their son under the bus for their own sakes, but that's beside the point. The Pharisees hear that Jesus healed on the Sabbath, and they don't see how he can be anything but a sinner. He healed on the Sabbath, and that automatically designates him a non-believer and a sinner. They even say as much, only to be lectured by the blind man, but even though the man makes a strong point, they nonetheless throw him out. Their tradition holds them back, keeps them from moving forward or making any progress beyond that which has already been made. As a result, they do not see Jesus for who he truly is, his teachings for what they truly are, his followers for who they are, or this new progressive movement for what it is. In short, their blinding traditionalism keeps them from achieving clarity of the situation.

On the other side of this story, though, there's the blind man. At the beginning of the story, he cannot see. Then, he has mud rubbed on his eyes, washes them off, and he has sight. However, this sight is not what John emphasizes. Consider for a moment the progress this man makes in identifying Jesus. When he is asked by the crowds who gave him sight, he replies, "the man called Jesus." Then, he's brought before the Pharisees. The first time he is asked who

healed him, he replies, “a prophet.” Then, the third time he is asked this question, he replies, “a man from God.” Finally, the man is approached by Jesus, and he is identified as “the Son of Man.” Over the course of this passage, we see the progression of how Jesus is identified from “the man called Jesus” to “the Son of Man,” almost as if, during his discussion with the crowd and the Pharisees, this man’s mental sight is coming into focus as well. The truth is becoming clearer and clearer, that Jesus is more than just “a man” and that the Pharisees are blinded by their traditions. Hence the reason this man was as bold as to speak up against the Pharisees, something very few people do out of fear of what would happen to them. We even see this man’s parents shy away from doing so out of fear of being “kicked out of the synagogue.” So, at the same time as his mind is bringing into clarity who Jesus is, there is an argument for this man’s mind bringing into clarity just how much the Pharisees’ traditions are holding them back, how important it is to not fear those who seek power, and how important it is to stand up for what one believes, whether or not it matches what the powers that be say they should be.

The third party that displays a certain level of blindness is the disciples. Recall that at the beginning of the story, the man is still blind, and the first thing the disciples ask Jesus is, “Who sinned? The man or his parents?” In other words, this man’s blindness must be a consequence of some action or event. This is a thought process with which we in the modern day are familiar. If a person smokes, they risk getting lung cancer. If a person studies hard, they will have great grades but may lack social skills. If a person doesn’t wear sunblock in mid-July while working outside, they’re going to get sunburned. Essentially, “every action has an equal but opposite reaction.” However, this is not always the case. People who never smoke a day in their life get lung cancer, and people who wear plenty of sunblock can still get skin cancer. People who get good grades don’t necessarily study all that much and may have great social skills. That’s the entire premise of Rabbi Harold Kushner’s famous work *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. So it is also with the blind man. Although certain passages of Scripture designate that the offenses of the parents will be felt by the third and fourth generation of children of the offenders, this man’s blindness is not because of his sinfulness, nor is it because of his parents’ sinfulness. His blindness is merely a means by which God’s message and identity is revealed, and over time, the blind man may come to realize that all his years without sight caused him to believe not what he sees but what the Spirit tells him, what he believes.

This is part of Lent’s theme: clarity. I spoke a couple weeks ago about achieving clarity while going for walks. Here we see the theme rise again. Over time, things become clearer, even if they don’t make sense or seem clear in the moment. Lent is a time to reflect, to look back at where you have been and what you’ve done, and to see how the Spirit has been guiding you through all of this life we live. While I didn’t understand at the age of 10 why my grandmother was murdered, I now understand it 20 years later as the means by which God instilled in me a burning desire to learn more about a God that lets that happen and to develop my faith. While I didn’t understand why I was bullied in middle school and high school, I now understand that it developed in me a passion for ministry and helping the downtrodden, just like I was for seven years. While I didn’t understand why Katie sat next to me the first night we were a couple as my anxiety caused me to be physically ill, I understand now that it’s because she has a compassionate and loving heart that I envy sometimes. This is something I’m sure you all understand as well. We don’t always understand why things happen the way they happen, whether that’s in regards to tragedies in our lives or where the Spirit leads us. However, with

time, everyone can achieve clarity if they only allow the Spirit to move them towards that clarity. Therefore, I invite you all to either start or to continue to take a step back during the Lenten season to ask yourselves “Where has God been in my moments of need?” and “How has God brought good out of the bad in life?”