

**“We’re All Born Blind”
The Rev. James S. Ward**

March 22, 2009

I have to tell you what happened to me a couple of weeks ago. I was invited to talk about our welcoming homeless men to our Lenten Retreat to a group of evangelical pastors. I was surprised and delighted to see a woman at the table because I used to “fellowship” with these guys until I wanted to bring my associate rector, a woman, along as well and was told it was a men’s group. Well, they were excited to hear about our experience and then it came time to pray and the leader said they would pray God’s blessing on the homeless and, he said, of course they would pray for what was going on in Sacramento that day, too. There were nods and sighs of recognition that that was the day that Prop 8 was being argued before the State Supreme Court.

So, I raised my hand tentatively, and said, “you may not want me to stay with you when you pray because I’m in favor of same sex marriage and will probably be praying differently than I assume many of you will be.” Well, they were glad that I had brought it up. One fellow assured me that they loved me anyway, another mentioned that he had been a part of a ministry to recover homosexuals for over twenty years, a third mentioned that his congregation had a number of members with children or siblings who were homosexual and that he was in transition and turmoil around the issue recognizing how much pain his members were experiencing because of the condemnation of the theological position his church had taken. It was a remarkable discussion.

When it came time to pray there were a number of wonderful prayers. I leaped in when the moment seemed right, inspired by the earnest and godly prayers I heard. I said, “Loving God, thank you for showing us in your Son Jesus Christ, that you always stand in the toxic place of the outcast homeless and the outcast homosexual. Now help us to join you there and give us eyes to see from their perspective, from your perspective. Amen.”

Now, that’s what I want to focus our vision on today: what happens when we step into the place of the outcast. Because that’s what goes on in this story from John’s Gospel. And the fact that it’s about our perspective, about our point of view, is tipped off by the disciples’ opening question to Jesus, “Who sinned this man or his parents that he was born blind?” We may be, perhaps, a bit more sophisticated about it, but the question, the judgment is just the same: Who is to blame for crime? is it the criminal or is it the surrounding society? Is it nature or nurture? the man or his parents?

I can see the scene. Maybe you can too. It’s as if there is a crowd of disciples and bystanders surrounding this poor blind beggar who is the object of the question, just standing there waiting to see what Jesus will say. It reminds me of the woman caught in the act of adultery who is brought to Jesus and thrown, half naked, into the middle of the crowd listening to him. It doesn’t matter that the question comes in this case from the disciples while in the case of the adulterous woman, it comes from the enemies of Jesus. The law is very clear about how such people are to be regarded and how they could be treated. And the law is really a framework for social sanctions, for stratification, a means of shoring up identity, status and everyone’s place in the order of things.

But let me suggest that there is a difference between standing at a distance in the crowd, watching and speculating about why this poor homeless wretch is suffering so, and coming inside sitting down beside him and getting to know him, eating with him and hearing his hopes and dreams. Some of us here, have recently traveled that distance, and all of us by extension have had that transformative experience, because some of our number have made that stranger's life somehow our own. Stories of Franz and Michael.

This is what Jesus does, or what the gospel writer we know as John has accomplished. We are drawn from the cool perspective of an objective observer, from the point of view of the disciples whose basic assumption is that of our society: that those who suffer are somehow to blame. Perhaps it is our need to keep their suffering away from us that makes us objectify them, label them, that makes us *them* them. Could our fear of them, really be our fear of becoming them, and our need to control them by “naming” them from a safe distance, an attempt to keep our fear at a distance.

We are drawn by John to identify with the blind beggar. His gift of sight, not so much restored as bestowed—“never” the like “has been heard of since the world began.” It becomes *our* gift of sight as with Jesus we join him in the center of the circle and the disciples surrounding the blind man are replaced by the neighbors, who had comfortably known the man for years as the blind beggar. But now they are frantically protesting this change in the world as they have known it, as if to try to put it back the way it was when they knew who was out and who was in, who was good and who was bad. And the Pharisees to whom they bring the man for judgment, these good men whose punctilious commitment to the letter of the law is such that they sacrifice its weightier matters like justice and mercy; they insist on mistaken identity to forestall their own exposure, which will finally come when, for the sake of the law, they crucify Jesus, the innocent victim.

I hope you have noticed how something is going on in our midst this Lent, how these gospel readings are illuminating our experience as a parish, how they are mirroring our own journey. As Jesus joins the man born blind and gives him sight, so he has drawn near to us and helped us to see from the perspective of those who are no account, unsavory outsiders, outcast, homeless, whose presence is so out of place in a place like Belvedere as to ignite an epidemic of fear, to cause scandal, threats and division. Lent calls us to a change of perspective, a new vision. Rather than seeing life from our usual point of view, we can begin to see through the eyes of Jesus, who is one with, standing in the place of the outcast, and whose divine vision given to the man born blind is also given to us to see as God sees, even as he is being cast out.

This is our prayer for our catechumens, who draw nearer and nearer to the water of baptism, to be illumined by the light of Christ and in whose light we are bathed, especially when we see through the eyes of the suffering outcast. And our prayer is also for ourselves that for the sake of those who stand and watch us, and especially for the sake of those to be baptized, we might so imitate Jesus that they—seeing our integrity, our wholeness, our identification with the poor without fear, but in love—that they might be inspired with us to love and service to the outcast Lord Christ.