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Lent 4 (Year A-2008)

Psalm 23
John 9

Can You See?

It is reported that the Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard once said that someone should gather up all the Bibles in the world, climb to the top of a mountain and once there, kneel and pray that God take them all back because we have misused them so severely! While I myself would not go to that extreme, I can certainly sympathize with Kierkegaard's sentiment. We are so poor at understanding and interpreting Scripture. Many reasons can be given for this, but today I would like to focus on one in particular: that is that by and large you and I are blind to the experience and perspective of the various authors' original audiences. It is almost exclusively the case that Scripture was written, not to those in power, or those who had means or political influence, but to people of burgeoning faith communities who were being oppressed and marginalized; who were often poor and powerless. And so, one of the most important interpretive moves we MUST make when reading Scripture as Christians in the 21st century is to try to put ourselves in the shoes of the poor and oppressed; to understand the message from that perspective before we apply it to our own lives.

But this is hard, some might even argue impossible for us because a major shift has happened in the world since the time of Jesus. Christianity has gone from a religion of the oppressed minority to that of the mass majority, who is at once responsible for some of the world's most significant achievements and its most atrocious self-inflicted tragedies (hence Kierkegaard's plea).

A perfect example of the harm that can be done in the name of Scripture is claim that the Gospel of John is anti-Semitic. There are those who argue that we should simply accept the fact that the writer of John is anti-Semitic. After all, John does talk a lot about the Jews and almost exclusively in a negative way. And there is no doubt that the Gospel of John and other parts of the New Testament have been *interpreted* anti-Semitically or used to justify anti-Semitic sentiment. Yet, if we understand John that way, I think we are revealing our blindness with regard to John and his original audience.

You and I know that Jesus was a Jew, and furthermore, the writer of the Gospel of John knows it too. So it makes little sense to think that John dislikes Jews in general. But who, then, is the Gospel writer referring to when he repeatedly refers to the Jews in a negative way? It would seem to be that he is referring to the powers that be within the Jewish religion, not Jews in general. All of the Gospel writers seem to have a beef with the Pharisees and other religious leaders, John particularly so. Yet instead of always designating their religious office, he often uses the term Jews. But make no mistake, he is not generalizing. Such a thought would be so foreign to him that it would never even enter his mind. Rather, he is referring to those who hold power and influence within the religious hierarchy, because he believes they have been blinded by their power. And it is true, they did have a great deal of power, but their power is on loan to them and at the discretion of the Roman authorities who occupied their land. In order to maintain their power and status, they had to ensure the Romans that their religion and its followers are basically harmless, that they could be easily contained and controlled and that they, the leaders, were just the people to do

the job. To do this, they used every means at their disposal, including the religious doctrine which guided the people.

And so we see that in today's reading the religious leaders are trying to bring Jesus back into line by charging him with violating the Sabbath, which is a mandated day of rest and no work. Each of the four Gospel writers report that Jesus has run-ins with the religious authorities over performing miracles on the Sabbath. But again John is different than the other three. It's a subtle difference, but John doesn't refer to the healing as a miracle, he calls it a sign. In fact, John never uses the term miracle in his story. In John's Gospel, if Jesus heals someone or turns water into wine it is not to showcase Jesus' as a miracle worker; it is to point to some larger reality about who God is in relation to God's people. One thing that is unique about John is that he is much less interested in what Jesus actually did on earth, than he is in what Jesus means for us in relation to God.

This concern of John's is also evident in the discussion Jesus has with his disciples concerning the blind man. The disciples ask, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Their question is rooted in an underlying theological assumption of the time, which went like this, "If you have good fortune, it is because God likes you. If life gives you a raw deal, it is because you have done something displeasing to God. And God's displeasure is not easily satisfied and so it may last for a few generations before God gets it out of his system." And Jesus' response, that the man is not blind because anyone did anything wrong but so that God's work might be revealed in him is not only a new theological interpretation, it is a direct challenge to the authority of the religious leaders.

Perhaps you have wondered why the religious leaders get so hot under the collar about Jesus and his preaching. After all, he is preaching about God. Why would religious leaders have a problem with that? According to John, their problem is that they have been using God as a tool to control people and maintain their own power. But Jesus is creating trouble for them by preaching that God loves them, that each person is a person of dignity and worth not by virtue of power, means or status, but by virtue of belonging to God. He is giving people permission to think on their own, instead of simply following the instructions of the religious leaders. And so the religious leaders, in an effort to reassert their power and discredit Jesus, bring him up on charges for breaking the Sabbath. And by the end of the chapter, John gets us wondering, who is it that is truly blind in the story?

As I said at the beginning, I can sympathize with Kierkegaard's sentiment. The truth that we need to recognize, especially those of us who are members of organized religion, is that we can be just as blind as the next person. We are not enlightened simply by virtue of being Christian. Religious doctrine has the power to guide, but it also has the power to narrow our vision, so that we begin to care more about our rules than people. The religious authorities of Jesus' day were right, technically. He violated the Sabbath, but what they failed to see is why. They missed the sign, they missed the larger reality Jesus was revealing to them, and it should send shivers down our spine, as we sit here on Sunday morning in church that the thing that blocked their view was their doctrine and their desire to hold onto their own power and position.

Perhaps you are beginning to ask yourself, like the Pharisees, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" But before we answer that question we need to remember Jesus' words

towards the end of the chapter: "I came into this world so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." That presents us with quite a bind doesn't it? Either we admit we are blind and receive our sight or we hold onto the belief that we can see and thus are blind. That hardly seems fair! I mean I assume we are all alright with the blind receiving their sight, but I am guessing that most of us would take issue with the idea of taking peoples' sight away from them. Where is the sign it that? What is its meaning and purpose? Is this a story about some kind of divine redistribution of justice, a God decreed reversal of fortune? Are you ready to join Kierkegaard on that mountain top?

Certainly Scripture, as exemplified in this passage from John can be confusing, frustrating, even aggravating at times. Yes, it has been misused and abused and, sadly, will continue to be. So what are we to do? And what about Jesus' perplexing statement? Can we see or are we blind? Perhaps instead of resolving these tensions, we are being called simply to live with them, as our own sort of sign that God's love for us is not dependent on us. Maybe John knows exactly what he is doing by calling Jesus' works signs and not miracles. Maybe we have to yet to learn that God's love is not some aberration, it is who Jesus has revealed God to be toward all of God's people. And as much as it offends our sense of fairness and what's right; no matter how disturbing it is for our balance of power, the truth is that it's as real for the blind man as it is for the Pharisees; it's as real for you and me, as it is for all of God's creation.

Let us pray: Grant us not the assurance of knowing we are right, O God, but the assurance that we belong to you and that you love all of us. Give us not the confidence in our own power and status, but grant us grace to trust in you and to follow where you lead even when we cannot see the way; through Christ our Lord. Amen.