

Elks, Atheists, and A Man Born Blind

^{NRS} Joh 9:1 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth.² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes,⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"⁹ Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."¹² They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided.¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight¹⁹ and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"²⁰ His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind;²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.²³ Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner."²⁵ He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."²⁶ They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"²⁷ He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?"²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."³⁰ The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened

the eyes of a person born blind.³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."³⁴ They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"³⁶ He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."³⁷ Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."³⁸ He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.³⁹ Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"⁴¹ Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

So there was an atheist and a bunch of elks in bar. It sounds like the start of a bad joke, doesn't it? Well, if you read Margie Boulé's column last Sunday in *The Oregonian*, you know it's no joke- at least not to 80 year-old Billie Sieg and the Elks club in Brookings. Attracted to the fellowship and the community service, Sieg wanted to join the Elks and made it as far as being sponsored and being interviewed. But one question stopped the process dead: does she believe in God. Sieg does not. And for the Elks, a private community service organization, this is a non negotiable. Now, by itself this is an interesting story, but it probably wouldn't have gone much beyond local gossip. What escalated this thing was when the club sent her a rejection letter and told her not only was she not welcome as a member, but she "[is] not permitted access to the lodge facility for any Elks social function, even as a guest." (Margie Boule, "Elks lodge bans woman because she's an atheist", *The Oregonian* 23 Feb. 2008)

Now, I've never been an Elk, but I support their right to establish their own membership standards. I don't think this by itself is exclusionary- that's just a group of people defining themselves and saying what they believe. But it's that next move- telling her she would not be welcome even as a guest, that's what makes this a more important

story- that isn't about institutions or civil liberties but one that's personal; one that's painful.

When we see one another as categories and not as individuals- this is a way of giving up on each other. When we view one another as categories, as Republican or Democrat, as Presbyterian or Roman Catholic, as believer or Atheist, and not as a mystery that is Ken, or Mark, or Sally, or Sue, that happens to be one of those other things, when we just know each other by short hand, in other words- we give up on the possibility that they can surprise us or grow or change. And when we do this we make assumptions that aren't true, and we start to become the kind of people we aren't proud of anymore.

This happens in our text over and over and over again this morning. As I said earlier, I think of John 9 in movements. In the first movement we see the disciples encounter the man born blind and see Jesus heal him. In the next movement we see his neighbors and friends encounter him. In the next two movements we hear how the man is hauled before the Pharisees not once but twice- and each time they're trying to figure out what kind of guy Jesus is- whether he's a good guy or not. And then finally in the last movement, the man born blind meets Jesus one last time. And the story in every one of these movements is about seeing and about knowing. The story is each is about people not seeing very well- and about people thinking they know things when they are absolutely clue free

In the first two movements we have two groups that should be able to see just fine, who are completely blinded by terrible assumptions. In the first movement it's the disciples. Fulfilling every bad church stereotype out there, the disciples are obsessed with one thing and one thing only- they're obsessed with sin. When they encounter this blind man, they don't have compassion for him, they don't ask him if he's hungry, they don't even ask him how he's doing- they have this insipid and arrogant theological conversation about sin. "Who sinned?" they want to know. "Who sinned- this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

See, when they're looking at this man- they don't see a person first and foremost. They see a category- they see sin. And it's like they can't even think in any other way. Thank goodness for Jesus- who deftly swoops in and says there's something beyond sinner and saint. Jesus says nobody sinned- and more than that that sin isn't even the point. Darkness isn't the point. What's important is the light- and as long as they are with him, that's what they should be about. And to prove it, he puts his hands on the man's eyes and opens them. Right there. Light of the world, indeed.

Well, the disciples aren't alone in having trouble seeing. When the man returns home, his friends are having trouble, too. Now you can't blame them for having a hard time recognizing him at first- it isn't everyday the blind receive there sight. Even in our own day with advanced medical technology, restoring sight is no easy feat. So you can understand that they did a double take when they saw him. But what's beyond the pale is that even after they ask him and they hear him in his own voice tell them what happened- even after all this they're still unable to accept that it's him. "It isn't him!" they say. "It's just someone who looks like him." I love this. It's like they think it's the Blind

April Fool's day and the guy has gone into town to find an imposter to play a big joke on everybody. It's not that it's so hard to recognize him- it's that they're so used to him being blind- they're so used to him as a category- they've forgotten there was a person there underneath all those dirty begger's robes.

We do this don't we? We get used to people one way. And it's almost impossible to see them any other. I remember when I was a kid, I saw my second grade teacher, Mrs. Lindsey, in the grocery store. Mrs. Lindsey was this Texas artifact- she had this big ol' white Texas hair and this deep, rich baritone from smoking all her life. And she had this pillowy, doughy face that almost always had a smile on it and these twinkling blue eyes. Well, one day I saw her in the Albertsons when I was there with my mom. And it was the strangest feeling. What was she doing there??? What was she doing out of the class room? Since I never saw her outside of school- I guess some funny, 2nd grade part of me just assumed she dwelled there forever and always, only leaving her room to walk us outside to recess. I just never imagined she had a life, an existence, outside of Harrison Lane Elementary school. We get used to thinking of people as categories, as a teacher, or a blind man, or a screw up, or a comedian, a mom, or an executive we forget that they're always more, infinitely more than this.

And when we do this- we make mistakes. We make assumptions that aren't true. And we short change ourselves from getting to know all that this person is capable of- all that God may be dreaming of for them.

Now in the third and fourth movements- it isn't the man born blind people are having a hard time with, it's Jesus. The religious leaders (the religious police is more like

it) have yet again forgotten that faith is more an art than a science. They have all these ideas about who God is and how God is supposed to act. And they're so certain about everything- did you notice that? When they find out Jesus healed this guy on the Sabbath, some of them say that Jesus can't be of God, because he broke Sabbath. And they're just dead certain about this. Let's see, if the healing is done on Tuesday, Ok, Wednesday, Ok, Thursday...ok. But Friday? The Sabbath? Nope. THAT couldn't be God. But then there's division because some of the others are equally certain that Jesus *couldn't* have done this unless it *was* God working through him. And they're equally certain. Sinners can't do things like this, they say. And everybody nods their heads in agreement. And so they're stuck with this huge problem. Only a sinner would heal on the Sabbath. But God wouldn't doesn't allow sinners to perform healings.

And they're so caught up with what God supposedly can and can't do- they're completely missing out on this person in front of them. This absolutely amazing person who was blind, completely blind- and now is seeing better than anyone.

The religious leaders are just so used to thinking in categories- they can't even imagine the possibility that God might surprise them and do something new. And it's such a sad way, a small way to view faith- it's like imagining God as this cosmic meter maid, just checking to make sure everyone is following the rules and not getting out of line. "Wup! Hey there Jesus. Good healing- I'd give it a 9, 9.1, but wrong day. Disqualified!"

This is exactly what's happening with Sieg and the elks. As you can imagine, the story generated quite a buzz. Letters about it have been streaming in, and Boulé wrote a

follow up column last Tuesday. In almost every case what I see is the tragedy of folks giving up on each other as people and just projecting their pet categories onto one another.

Take Sieg herself. While I sympathize with her, it sounds like she was just initially trying to find a nice hang out, she ends up seeing the Elks as these old fashioned dinosaurs threatening the freedom of the modern world. Boulé quotes Sieg saying, “My only intent is to bring this organization at least into the 20th century.” (Same article) Well how noble of her. It’s as if she just can’t imagine that thinking people who keep faith as part of their organization wouldn’t want to be delivered from such backwards ways. I mean forget the 21st century, she just wants to bring them into the 20th century! She can’t see them any longer as individuals- she now sees backwards religious zealots, no doubt ready to fan the fires of a new inquisition.

And predictably the Elks and their supporters have flooded the papers with fearful diatribes claiming this grandma is somehow threat to America, the founding fathers, and to apple pies everywhere. When they see her or think about her, they don’t see a complicated individual anymore- no, they see an Atheist, some kind of three headed monster whose anarchism could throw the whole world into chaos.

It’s like everyone in these stories- Sieg, the elks, the disciples, the Pharisees, it’s like everyone has given up on each other and are just going to accept these lazy, hazy categories instead of doing the hard work of puzzling through the mystery of each other.

Thank goodness these folks aren’t the only ones in these stories. Thank goodness there are people who show us a better way- even if there a little less obvious. My

favorite moment in John 9- it's so small and unimportant sounding it's easy to just skip right over it. It comes in the fourth movement when the Pharisees have called back the man born blind for a second time and they're trying to get him to think of Jesus as a sinner. And he's just fed up. He's fed up with the disciples, with his neighbors, his parents who sell him out, and definitely with these pastors pushing their interpretations on him. They say to him, This man is a sinner, give glory to God. And his response is so great. He says, You know what? I don't know if this guy is a sinner or not. Maybe he is. I don't know. And this is such a powerful statement, because by saying this he invites them to realize they really don't either. He then focuses on the only thing important, the only thing he really knows- he says The only thing I know is that I was blind, but now I see.

And in an instant he helps us see that all of those questions- those questions about sin. Those questions about Jesus- whether he's a good guy or not. They just aren't important. The only thing important is that this man was blind, and now he can see.

And in the Sieg story there was literal good news. In the Tuesday edition of the Oregonian in the letters to the editor there was one letter that hit the nail right on the head. It's from a man named Gene Spina, an elk who lives right here in Portland. He writes: "Billie Sieg sounds like a wonderful lady, one I would love to meet and happy to consider a friend. I respect her beliefs and was particularly impressed with her honesty and her refusal to compromise her beliefs." Then he talks about the Elks and his long membership with them. "The Elks, like Sieg, remain true to their core values- values that include a belief in God, respect for one another and the obligation to pledge allegiance to the United States of America." And then, putting all the categories away, all the politics

away, he closes writing: “And one more thing- it would be my pleasure to host Sieg at my home lodge the next time she visits Portland.” (Gene Spina, The Elks and the atheist: Fuss ensues, The Oregonian February 26, 2008)

Christ tells us when we follow him we aren't to look for darkness but for the light. Part of what that means is that we don't give up on one another, that even when a person seems to support and stand for all the things we disagree with and that just drive us nuts. No, if we follow Christ we look for the light- we look for them to surprise us and jump out of all those boxes we've made for them.

Of course the hardest people to extend this grace to might be an enemy, someone who has hurt us- but it might just be ourselves, too.

A couple of years ago, I went to a Donate Life breakfast in Portland to hear more about organ donation- a nice breakfasty topic. I went mainly to support Rob and Craig. I honestly wasn't expecting much. Man was I wrong. One of the best speakers that morning was a man name John who lives in Southern Oregon. John's an older guy now who looks like a lumberjack in a plaid shirt and suspenders. When he was 20, he was a medic serving in Washington. One day there was a terrible explosion in the infirmary, his face and hands suffered massive chemical burns. He would live, but the doctors told him he would never see again. Moreover, the chemicals left his face darkened. So dark, most people who saw him assumed he was an African-American and treated him as such, which even in Oregon wasn't all that great forty years ago.

The doctors told John he'd be blind his whole life, but something inside him just couldn't accept this. And he kept going to doctors, just to see if he could find someone to

tell him something different. None did. Years passed. His wife gave birth to two girls- neither of which he saw. Can you imagine holding your little baby in your arms and not being able to look into her eyes- to see her smile at you, to see her first steps?

John said he'd pretty much given up hope that he'd ever see again, but he still kept going to doctors- until one day, one day one of them said something different. He talked about some experimental process with cornea transplants. John said he didn't understand a word. He just signed up.

And do you know- 31 years after doctors told him he would never see again, John received a cornea transplant. He said the first thing he did when he could see again was to take his daughters' faces, grown now, and just stare at them, to just stare at their beautiful faces- as if to make up for lost time. And then, he said, at dinner that night he was sitting across from his wife. And with all the tact of a lumberjack said to her, "The last time I saw you we were kids. God, you look old." And she replied, "Well you're not much to write home about yourself. Have you looked at yourself?" And he got up and went to the bathroom and just looked at the old man he had become- looking into a face he never thought he would see again, a face both familiar and strange. And he said he realized standing there that night how close he had come to giving up, and he smiled thinking to himself no matter how certain anyone sounds, you just never know what's going to happen. Never. **Amen.**