

John 9: 1-11
"Messy Faith"
March 26, 2017
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I remember a childhood family vacation.
We had been in car a lot that day.
It was hot and the a/c didn't always make it past the front seats to me and my sister.
We were probably a bit grumpy during some of that trip and definitely ready to be free from the confines of the Nyiri family roadster.
All I remember hearing was my Dad saying by the pool side we could get it – and I took off – jumping with reckless abandon – flying through the air – the perfect cannonball a coming – I hit the water and realized instantaneously...I was not ready for the deep end of the pool.

I flailed trying to touch the bottom and quickly realize...I could not.
My sister jumped in after me and my frantic flailing almost took her down too.
Then my dad jumped in (with his shirt on mind you) and with feet firmly on the bottom of the pool, he stood up with me in one arm and my sister under his other arm and walked us to the pool's edge.

I'm sure I've sufficiently blocked out the "teaching lesson" my father gave me as I sat there composing myself.
To this day though, what sticks in my mind was how my Dad showed up and with calm, cool, collection gathered me up and cared for me.

Today, I take it a step further and say that sometimes we just need to jump right in – whether we're ready or not & trust that our Heavenly Dad will show up and show us a way...

So, let's jump in to John, chapter 9...

At the heart of this text is something called discernment ~ that intentional seeking for what is fruitful...what is light & life giving...

The text pushes us to honest (albeit somewhat painful) self-examination...
Now, I know human nature...or at least I know my human nature and right now I'd like to sweep the mess under the carpet...However, it is Lent and that's what Lent is about...so, let's dive deeper....

A man is born blind – the disciples inquire about the why & wherefore of the situation – and Jesus says it's not about that...it's about what God is doing & what God will continue to do (if we open our eyes...but I jump too far ahead...so let's tread water here a little longer)...

There is a healing of a man born blind & it alienates him from everybody...(NOTE: I didn't read it all this morning but if you continue in chapter nine for the remaining thirty verses you'll see what I'm saying is all in there.)

He is given his sight (which if you'll note he never asked for – Jesus took it upon himself to heal this chap) and he is alienated from the community in which he has resided [or perhaps he has lived there and been overlooked by so many for so long...]

Regardless, he is given sight and everybody – even those closest to him turn a blind eye to him:

- His neighbors – “it's not him, but someone who looks like him”
- The religious leaders – fighting amongst themselves as they tried to find fault in Jesus for performing the miracle on the Sabbath
- His parents – “we know he is our son...we know he was born blind...how did it happen?...ask him, he's of age...he will speak for himself” (NOTE: John's writer tells us the parents responded this way because they knew that anyone who proclaimed Jesus as Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.)

The formerly blind man is then brought back in front of his inquisitors, and they ask him what happened...He tells them step by step again the sequence of events...he asks them why are they asking again for the details, adding, “Do you also want to be his disciples?”...

And...they revile him (which is a nice way of saying, they insulted, abused, scorned, condemned, censured, berated, disparaged him...)

There was no celebration!

No one rejoices at his new sight!

No one stands by him in his inquisition!

No one gives him the benefit of the doubt! [Except for Jesus]

Instead...they drove him out! Saying, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” (#SpiritualArrogance)

They drove him out!

Perhaps because transformation upends cherished assumptions we've built our lives around... no matter how tenuous they may be.

Perhaps new evidence is so difficult to assimilate into our schema...that we jettison it...even if it means:

- we kick Jesus out with the truth-telling witness...
- we “throw the baby out with the bath water”...
- we let grace go in order to grip tighter pre-conceived notions...

John, chapter 9 could, however, open our eyes to see that often our assumptions eclipse gospel truth.

- “people get what they deserve” – so, I'm not supposed to care about their well-being.
- “people don't really change” – so I'd be naïve or careless to give them a second chance.

- “certain people are worthy to be heard” – so I can ignore, overlook or pretend not to notice those I deem unworthy.
- “there are worse sinners out there and we know who they are” – thank God, I’m not one of them.

We all have bedrock assumptions upon which our life construct is based.
(I know mine – you know yours – God knows both...)

- Are we prepared to have them overturned by the One who reveals new ways of seeing?
- Are we ready for the messiness that kind of vision could involve?
- Are we willing to recognize in this kind of faithfulness that we just might see God face to face?

We all know how Lent ends.

It ends with Jesus on a cross – laid in a tomb.

The child we celebrated at Christmas will end up in a borrowed tomb on Good Friday.

We also know how the story ends.

Perhaps, then, Lent is about seeing what God is already up to – if we keep our eyes open.

I love it when Rev. Wright says things I like.

I like it when Rev. Wright says things that challenge me – challenge us to continue in this journey toward being Christ’s disciples who bring the kingdom of Heaven a bit closer here on earth (notice I said I like it – I don’t love it because it creates dissonance within me – it makes life a bit messy at times to incorporate what it means to be the body of Christ at work in this world...however, I know it is necessary. And for that I am grateful.)

On Christmas Eve, he did both when he quoted one of my favorite theologians, Howard Thurman’s, poem,

The Work of Christmas

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.
– Howard Thurman (1899-1981)

Faith is that simple...that messy...that beautiful...

Amen.¹

¹ I am indebted to Rev. Jill Duffield's exposition on this Sunday's liturgical texts for teaching me how to see this John passage in a new frame. Her exposition can be found at: <http://pres-outlook.org/2017/03/4th-sunday-lent-march-26-2017/>