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The Lenten Journey of Gospel Nonviolence (Part 5)

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On the Road to Peace

John's Gospel, the supposedly most "spiritual" one, is full of death threats and assassination attempts, such as the end of chapter 8, where the religious authorities pick up stones to kill the nonviolent Jesus. He barely escapes, but gets excommunicated, kicked out of the Temple. It's in this context, this life and death struggle, that Jesus heals a blind man in one of the most astonishing episodes of healing vision, revolutionary spirituality and political discipleship in the New Testament (from Sunday's Gospel, John 9:1-41).

The opening line in the original Greek tells it all: Jesus walks by and sees, not just a man, but humanity born blind from birth. Everyone is blind except Jesus who clearly sees that none of us can see at all. It is a bold assertion. In response, his disciples pretend to be theologians, and ask the age-old question, "Why do people suffer?" In pursuit of their ethical theories, they cite this poor blind man as Exhibit A. "In this case, who is at fault, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" Like the religious authorities, they muse about the sin of others, blind to their own sinfulness. They sound like the religious authorities and try to engage Jesus as they did earlier in lofty talk about imponderable questions. But notice: they show no concern for the blind man or for Jesus, who just missed being stoned to death by these religious big shots.

The question of suffering does not originate with Jesus. He sees our common blindness and the individual born blind "as an opportunity for God to be glorified." Is Jesus a callous bystander who does not care about the suffering of others? Not at all. It sounds like he spiritualizes other people's problems away, but in fact, he's the only one who takes action to heal others. The disciples, on the other hand, with their lofty

question, sound interested and concerned, but like the authorities, do nothing to heal the poor man's blindness. They show no compassion or concern for the poor blind beggar or for Jesus. They merely assert their own egos by philosophizing at the expense of the poor.

"Neither he nor his parents sinned," Jesus explains. "It is so that the works of God might be made visible through him. We have to do the works of the One who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Jesus, the light of the world, heals us of our blindness. He spits on the ground, makes clay with the saliva and smears the clay on our eyes. John's Gospel recalls Genesis' story of creation and John the Baptist's story of baptism. This God of ours, ever creating us anew, sends us to wash ourselves clean in the "Pool of the Sent." Finally, we can see. The God of vision puts mud on humanity's eyes, sends humanity to wash, and gives us vision.

Once those who are healed of blindness begin to see, the rest of humanity, still blind, fights clear-sighted vision. The remaining saga deals with blind humanity's protest of Christ's healing gift of vision. As Christ the light of the world is persecuted and finally killed, so his disciples, healed and now able to see with Christ's own vision, will be persecuted and finally killed.

The once blind man's neighbors and those who had seen him begging question him. "How were your eyes opened?" they ask. "The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and told me to go and wash," he explains. "So I went and washed and was able to see."

They take him to the Pharisees, presumably the ones who had tried to kill Jesus. In verse 14, we're told for the first time that Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath. Jesus has broken the law! The use of spit certainly violated Jewish custom and the cleanliness laws. But public action on the Sabbath was a crime. Jesus' healing was illegal, an act of civil disobedience. One can only wonder how the Pharisees rage against the illegal healing of Jesus on the Sabbath, but only hours earlier, attempted to kill Jesus--on the Sabbath.

The interrogation of the healed man turns into a courtroom drama. He takes the witness stand and faces hostile prosecutors. First, the Pharisees ask him how he can see. He tells them, simply, truthfully, what happened. They immediately criticize Jesus. "This man is not from God because he does not keep the Sabbath." (Hours earlier they said he was not from God because he was possessed and because he claimed to be God.) There is division among them about Jesus. So they question the healed man again. "What do you have to say about him, since he opened your eyes?" "He is a prophet," the blind man answers. The uneducated poor person ranks Jesus among the great ancestors of Judaism, in a class with Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Elijah. His answer infuriates the authorities. They refuse to believe that he was ever blind. So they summon his parents.

They put the parents on trial. "Is this your son who you say was born blind?" they ask. "How is it that he now sees?" The parents become defensive. "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind," they answer. "We do not know how he sees now, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him. He can speak for himself." They do not defend their son. We are told they are afraid. They knew that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue. Fearing excommunication and ostracism, they denied any knowledge about Jesus or their son's healing. They did not want to get in trouble with the law. They would not, could not, risk their reputations, their social standing or their lives

for their son. They leave him alone. They disappear from the story and are never heard from again.

For a second time, the religious authorities question the formerly blind man. They begin with a pious proclamation. "Give God the praise!" they say, appearing holy and righteous, yet without any intention of praising God. Their one concern is to protect their control over the Temple, the synagogues, their religious tradition, their authority, and their privilege. "We know that this man Jesus is a sinner!" they declare. "If he is a sinner," the healed man testifies, "I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see." His testimony remains simple, to the point, and truthful. "What did he do to you?" they ask again. "How did he open your eyes?" "I told you already and you did not listen," the healed man replies. "Why do you want to hear it again?" he asks the sanctimonious, murderous authorities. Then he pulls all the stops: "Do you want to become his disciples too?"

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All hell breaks loose. The question holds both a confession of discipleship to Jesus and an invitation to discipleship. Here, for the first time, a disciple of Jesus challenges the authorities. None of the other disciples in any of the Gospels ever issues a challenge to the authorities. His question is a breakthrough, and after the death and resurrection of Jesus, will eventually become the refrain of the early church.

The religious authorities go berserk. They will not stand for such an affront. They immediately ridicule him: "You are that man's disciple; we are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this one is from." The healed man refuses to back down. He has become the interrogator and put them on the stand. He gives it right back to them: "This is what is so amazing, that you do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if one is devout and does God's will, God listens to him. It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything."

The interrogation table has been turned around "Who do you think you are?" they ask. "You are uneducated. You are poor. You are a complete sinner, and yet you dare to teach us?" Then they throw him out of the Temple.

Next to death, the worst act that could befall someone was to get kicked out of the Temple. One might as well be blind. It meant you were expelled from society. The once blind man is now back to square one, no better off than when he started. He had spoken the truth, defended his healer, and admitted to being a disciple of the healer. After engaging the bloodthirsty theologians and religious authorities in debate about faith and healing, he is now completely ostracized and marginalized to the outskirts of the Temple. One presumes even his parents will have nothing to do with him now.

Precisely at this moment, when he has been kicked out, ostracized and hit rock bottom despair, Jesus appears. We are told that Jesus hears what happened to the man he healed and immediately goes looking for him. Rarely in the Gospels does Jesus go searching for anyone, even a poor person whom he has already helped. The story should be over. Someone has been healed; someone was even kicked out of the religious establishment by the authorities for defending Jesus. That alone would mark the story as breath-

taking and inspiring. But Jesus goes out on the margins looking for the man. Jesus knows those margins well because he too has been kicked out of the establishment. He too walks alone on the edge of society.

When he finds the healed man, Jesus asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Humanity?" Jesus wants to know if the once blind man believes in him.

"Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" the man responds.

"You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he," Jesus answers.

"I do believe, Lord," he says as he worships Jesus. The formerly blind man now sees and hears the Son of Humanity.

The discipleship journey has come full circle. After his healing, the interrogations by the religious authorities, the abandonment of his parents, and his excommunication from the Temple, the once blind man meets Christ and worships him. There on the margins, outside the religious establishment, in the place where those who have been kicked out of society dwell, the real journey of faith begins. Jesus seeks him out, finds him, introduces himself and invites true worship. When Jesus intimately reveals his true identity, the once blind man worships Jesus as God. No disciple has ever done that before. After all he has been through, from the glorious discovery of sight to the worst possible rejection, the healed man meets God. His life is fulfilled. He has seen the Christ. He glorifies God.

"I came into this world for judgment," Jesus announces, while the once blind man worships him, lying prostrate at his feet, "so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind."

This amazing story invites us to reflect on the blindness of our violence and injustice, the healing vision of peace and nonviolence which Jesus offers, and the price we must pay for such healing vision. If we dare accept the consequences of seeing the world through the loving eyes of the nonviolent Jesus, even though we might find ourselves on the margins of the culture of war and the institutional church as it supports war and injustice, we can trust that Jesus himself will seek us out, find us, reveal himself to us and invite us to true worship. In that moment, we will be truly healed and like the once blind man--like a new nonviolent humanity--we will give greater glory to the God of love and peace.

For further reflections on Gospel nonviolence, see John Dear's books, *Jesus the Rebel*, *The Questions of Jesus* and *Transfiguration*, (all available from www.amazon.com). To order the DVD about John, see: www.sandamianofoundation.org. John will be the keynote speaker at the International Thomas Merton Society's conference this weekend in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. See: www.johndear.org.

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