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THE WAY FORWARD

There's a lot going on in these long readings like last week's and this.

- Instead of struggling to find what to talk about as happens with some texts, the challenge here almost becomes what not to talk about.
- There's just so much.

But one thing that jumped out at me in this story of the healing of one who was born blind is the ways in which he is referred to in this text.

- "The man blind from birth."
- "The man born blind."
- "The one born blind."

Why do they, do we call him these things?

- Well, obviously, this is the way John's Gospel refers to him.
  - Mostly, anyway.
  - And it's fairly descriptively accurate.

Once JESUS heals him, he is referred to several more times:

- "The man who used to sit and beg;"
- "The man who had been born blind;"
- "The blind man."

It seems that, even after being healed, people can't accept the transformation that has happened for him.

- All these identifications understand him only in terms of who he used to be, and in terms of his limitations.
- Perhaps there is an intention to recognize what he has overcome,
  - but I wonder if these namings don't lock him in his past and define him by those things that previously restricted what he could do.
  - It's almost an effort to keep him in his past.

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But don't we do that today as well?

- Don't we define ourselves and/or others in terms what limits us or by the difficult things we've experienced?
- Even if we've overcome them and take a measure of pride in that,
  - I still wonder if we are doing justice to our current reality, or just continuing to link ourselves to the past.

When we refer to someone as "divorced" or "widowed," for instance, are we honoring a significant relationship that ended,

- or defining someone in terms of what they once were?
- Even a term like "cancer-survivor,"—which I know has many positive associations for those who have endured diagnosis and treatment, and come out on the other side grateful for their recovery—
  - but does that label risk defining that person in terms of what they've overcome, and reducing who they are to a single measure?

In this story, it seems like it's just really, really hard for the people around the man who received his sight to adjust to his new reality,

- or to see him for anything more than what he used to be.

- And some folks don't recognize him at all.
- Others, including his parents, know what he struggled with and see his transformation,
  - but aren't sure what to make of it.

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The two exceptions to this behavior of locking him into the past are, first, the man himself, and second, JESUS.

- The man who now sees can only rejoice in his recovery and looks ahead to an open and even delightful future that I'm sure exceeds anything he could previously have imagined.
  - How else could he engage the religious authorities who have intimidated others (including his parents) with such good humor:
    - "Do you want to become HIS disciples, too?"
- Indeed, there is a certain joyfulness to his responses that is easy to miss if we understand him only as "the man born blind."
- Consider the brave playfulness of his retorts to the authorities:
  - "Whether HE is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"
  - Or, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where HE comes from, yet HE opened my eyes. We know that GOD does not listen to sinners. HE listens to the godly person who does HIS will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from GOD, HE could do nothing."
    - Our friend has been given a wonderful and open future and nothing will deter him from seizing it.

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JESUS also looks to the future rather than the past,

- inviting this man to faith and encouraging him by not just taking his questions seriously,
  - but revealing HIMSELF to him—"You have seen HIM," which by the way is both joyful and moving, recognizing who the man is now.
- All of this leads the man who now sees to make the profound and idyllic confession, "LORD, I believe."

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I think it's worth pausing here to consider the responses of the religious leaders.

- In spite of the business they're in—that of studying and proclaiming all of GOD'S possibilities, they cannot accept the results of this encounter between the formerly blind man and JESUS.
- Either the man is lying or it's not the same man.
  - When it is confirmed by his parents and others that he is indeed the man who was blind, they question him further.
- They try to show that all this is a lie.
  - "JESUS can't have done this because HE is a sinner."
    - (After all, everyone is a sinner, right? So, JESUS must be one, too.)

The big problem is that if they acknowledge that JESUS really healed this man, then there are all kinds of consideration that they, well, don't want to consider.

- If HE indeed did this, then HE must be from GOD.
  - By the way, that should be good news, right?
- In fact, some—many—had been calling JESUS the MESSIAH.
  - The ONE these leaders had been waiting for.
  - The ONE they had been preparing the people for.
    - The ONE that they, however, don't seem to want to show up.
      - If the MESSIAH shows up, everything is going to change, and we don't want that. Right?
    - Doesn't that really show a failure to trust GOD and GOD'S possibilities?

- But that's exactly what our formerly unseeing friend is embracing and rejoicing, isn't it?
    - And it invites us to consider whether we really want the future and the change that the MESSIAH might bring to us.
      - No, change that, has brought to us.
    - Do we really want the open and full-of-possibility future that JESUS offers?
      - Or would we rather just keep the status quo?
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In the movie, Monty Python's Life of Brian, the main character and his mother are walking down a street when they are confronted by a beggar.

- "Alms for an ex-leper," the man pleads.
  - The mother tries multiple times to send the man away, but he persists.
- Finally, Brian asks, "Did you say 'ex-leper'?"
  - "That's right," he replies, "but I was cured, sir."
- "Who cured you," Brian inquires.
  - "JESUS did, sir," the beggar explains. "One minute I'm a leper with a trade, next minute my livelihood's gone. Bloody do-gooder."

Some folks are content in their situations.

- Some folks don't want the change that JESUS can bring into one's life.
    - And some don't want or can't let others be changed by JESUS.
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Let me ask you to take a moment right now, to take stock of your past—the good, the difficult, the encouraging, the challenging.

- What is it from which you need to be freed to receive the open future GOD has prepared for you?
- What designations no longer serve you?
- What identifiers are holding you back?

Certainly, tragedy or challenge or limitation shapes who we are.

- But how has it held you back from the joy and freedom GOD has given you?
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In baptism, GOD sets in front of each of us a new identity: child of GOD.

- In faith, GOD gives us new designation: forgiven.

Think about those terms, those identities: child of GOD and forgiven.

- How much have you claimed those for yourself?
  - How have you let them replace some of the other names you have been called or accepted?
- I don't want to deny or dismiss the importance of the scars, or the triumphs for that matter, that we carry forward.
- But the way forward is in the future.
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In the movie, The Lion King, Rafiki hits Simba with a stick

- "Hey. What did you do that for?" asks Simba.
    - "What does it matter," Rafiki replies. "It's in the past."
  - "Yeah," says Simba, "but it still hurts."
    - "Yes, the past can hurt," Rafiki explains, "but the way I see it, you can either run from it or LEARN from it."
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You know, there's probably a good reason that the windshield on your car is so big and the rearview mirror is relatively small.

- It's good to be able to glance back once in a while.
- But the key to getting where you need to go is looking forward.  
(You're going to think about that now when you get in your car today.)

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The story of the formerly blind man invites us recognize that JESUS is calling us forward.

- The past matters, but it is past.
- JESUS' cross reminds us that the hurts, sorrows, mistakes, and regrets that have marked us may describe us, but they do not define us.
- We are no less than GOD defines us to be.
- We are GOD'S beloved children.
  - The cross of JESUS assures us that GOD'S love is always more powerful than our tragedies.
  - JESUS comes to heal us and free us and lead us into a new identity and a new and open future.
    - All we have to do is let JESUS take our past.