

4 Lent 4/3/11

St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

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Although most often the sermon discussion about this Gospel focuses on the blind man and the Pharisees, what leaped out at me this time was the situation faced by the man's parents because it reminded me of the importance of community in my own life history.

The tiny Episcopal Church that was my first holds probably only a hundred or so when packed. But that's where I attended Sunday school classes long enough to accumulate an impressive array of little pins that proved I was faithful in my attendance – or, at least, that my parents were faithful in sending me. But I don't know whether that experience is enough for me to claim the title "Cradle Episcopalian," since I wasn't actually baptized until I was an adult and, especially, since I spent a lot of my life exploring the paths that wandered through the various detours provided by the considerable number of off-brand religions available in America – including what David Breuer, rector of St. Luke's, Los Gatos, referred to in his sermon when I was ordained as a Transitional Deacon as the "fever swamps of esoterica."

In February 1991, however, came an experience that has dramatically altered the rest of my life – I was going through a divorce, leaving me feeling unsettled and unconnected, very much in need of folks outside of that process who would help restore my sense of equilibrium. I didn't any longer have a church that I was attending regularly; so it seemed to me that I needed to find myself a new one with loving folks who would accept me as part of their extended family. Well, at the time I was working for the District Attorney and appearing regularly in one of the courts just a couple of blocks from here. My first step back to mainline religion came then at noon on Ash Wednesday of that year, as I stepped through the doors of Trinity for the first time ever. Was I properly welcomed? I guess I was. I was asked to help take up the collection. I didn't actually start attending Trinity. Instead I opted for St. Luke's in Los Gatos, since it was closer to my home, but that community became very important to me indeed. And, rather obviously, that I found the right religious community has had a profound, long-term effect on my life. You see the evidence of that effect before you today.

Which brings us back to those parents in today's Gospel reading: As a consequence of my experience since 1991, I can begin to sense the importance to the parents of their synagogue. First I ought to point out that, according to Biblical scholars, the story is really anachronistic. There is no evidence that those Jews who spoke well of Jesus, or even acknowledged that he was someone special, were being thrown out of their synagogues—or, for that matter, in any way being discriminated against by their fellow Jews – at least during his lifetime. Since we're coming up on Palm Sunday, note particularly the story of the crowds welcoming him as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Presumably it could never have been written as it was if such antipathy between Jesus' admirers and the leaders of the various synagogues really existed.

On the other hand, there was a growing rift between normal, everyday Jews and those who, after his death, proclaimed that Jesus was not only Messiah, but perhaps even the very son of the Most High. That belief was so far from any of the traditional Jewish beliefs regarding the nature of God and our relationship to him that it must have seemed inconceivable to others in the synagogues that those early Christians remained Jews at all. So the story that John tells here says a lot more about life in the community in which his group of Christians lived than it does about life in Jesus' own era. And, of course, by the time John's Gospel was written, near the end of the First Century, there was a growing number of Samaritans and Gentiles swelling the ranks of Christian communities, including the one that produced this Gospel.

It should come as no surprise at all, then, that believers in Christ would be seen as no longer fellow Jews. And, if members of the synagogues had access to the earlier Gospels, such as the incident that Matthew tells about regarding the Jews who cried out for Jesus to be crucified, asking that his blood be on their heads, and those of their children, surely tensions would have been high indeed. In fact, this story is a precursor to the later depiction of the disciples shut up in the upper room, after the crucifixion, as the Gospel puts it, "for fear of the Jews."

If we think more about this particular incident, though, in which the blind man's parents are said to be afraid of being expelled from the synagogue, and take it on its own terms, with more concern for the meat of the story than for its historical accuracy, we can see a dramatic difference between the situation of people in John's community and these two unhappy parents. The Christians in the day when the Gospel was written at least had their own community to rely on, but there was no analogous community for the parents here. Without the synagogue they're on their own. "Tough," we might be tempted to say to them. "There are more important considerations in the world than your sense of belonging. Stick up for the man who cured your son's blindness." To put a bit of verbal spin on it we could even add: "Can't you *see* how remarkable that event was? Your son was blind, and because of that man, Jesus, *he* can now see. Can't *you*?"

But, then, speaking as one who realizes personally, from my own life, how important community can be, I'd rather turn the way we view this story on its head and look at it not as a way of thinking about the way the parents have dealt with the challenge they were given when they were asked to take a stand, but, instead, at the way their synagogue is being depicted. We, as church, can learn something from the story about how we should be to those who find their way to us who may not concur with us about any number of things, ranging from styles of worship to attitudes toward political matters of the day to theology.

Some of you may have had experiences like the one I had many years ago when I spoke with a very committed clergyman from a church at the far end of conservatism. I asked him exactly what beliefs he had in that church. His response was that he didn't want to tell me because, if he explained them to me and I rejected them, my soul was in far greater danger than if I were blissfully ignorant of the truth. Well, Tony Jones, one of the leaders of a group of clergy and others today who have mostly, though not exclusively, come out of the evangelical mega-churches, in his book *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* has counseled us to be not so sure of our sometimes firmly-held convictions. Humility is a virtue. Here's what he says:

Maybe you've seen this before: some well-meaning evangelist spray-paints "JESUS IS THE ANSWER" on the side of a railroad bridge. Then some smart aleck comes by later and adds "SO WHAT'S THE QUESTION?"

It seems to many emergents that the question is difficult, intricate: What is the meaning of life? Why is there evil in the world? How is God involved in our lives? Just what is the "Kingdom of God"? How can we be involved in God's work in the world? These are hard questions, and they demand nuanced, complex answers. So they fight back against a world that vaunts simple solutions to complex problems, and they do so, first, by encouraging the questions.... "(Q)uestioning is not an act of defiance.... It is a trait of integrity.

I like that expression of the limitations of our human intellects. It also puts into context, I think, why churches – and synagogues – should think of themselves not so much as protectors of the truth (whatever its members may think it to be) but as a place of community for all of us seeking answers to the sort of questions that Tony Jones speaks of in his book. It's ironic that the synagogue should be depicted in this Gospel reading as determined to throw people out for their beliefs, since the very name *synagogue*, in Greek, means "to bring together."

So, if there is a moral in the story of the problem being confronted here by the blind man's parents, surely it is that all of us should strive to be radically open to others. That we should shut none out. That we should be ready to search together with any who would join us for answers to life's questions – recognizing always, however, the limitations of human understanding and knowing that our answers must be open always to further illumination as our dialogue with others, and contemplation by ourselves, continue to be informed by the light shined on them by the Holy Spirit, which seeks continually to bring us, like that blind man himself, from darkness into the light. AMEN