

Suffering and Salvation in African-American Spirituals (IV):

Guide My Feet

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: John 9:1-41

There is a touching and telling scene at the end of the Academy-award-nominated movie *Ray*, a biopic of the great singer, songwriter and entertainer Ray Charles. 18 years earlier, the State of Georgia had banned Ray Charles from playing in any Georgia venue because he had refused to play before a segregated audience. Now by legislative act, they lifted the ban, apologized to him, and declared the new state song to be the Charles standard, *Georgia On My Mind*. I was struck by the irony of a blind man's vision; the one who couldn't see bringing insight to a state where "blind justice" was threatened by prejudice, fear, and racial hatred. We've come a long way since then, and, of course, Cleveland is a far cry from Georgia. And yet, racism continues to plague our nation as its "original sin"--the practice of slavery that existed from its founding and which, in fact, was written into the United States Constitution. Despite the gains made during the Civil Rights Movement, the passage and renewal of the Voting Rights Act, and more recent efforts towards affirmative action, according to a recent poll, only 25% of African-Americans believe that civil rights have "greatly improved" during their lifetime, and 27% report race-based discrimination in public life or employment at least once a week [*results of a Gallup poll reported in the Plain Dealer, August 30, 2003*]. Our own congregation's journey from exclusively white membership, through intentional integration, to increasing racial diversity includes stories both of courage and complacency; of people with clear and clouded vision. Thanks to the efforts of member Sebraien Haygood, we'll have that story told through a series of videotaped interviews with "eyewitnesses" available soon. As a nation, as a faith community, we've come a long way, but we still have some distance to travel before we can truly describe ourselves as "colorblind."

Today's gospel text is a tale of blindness and sight, but be warned. The deceptively simple account of Jesus healing a man born blind sets the stage for a discussion of spiritual blindness and enlightenment. Who are the ones in need of spiritual insight? And likewise the blind who, in fact, come to see? Because this is a very long text, I'm going to read a few verses, make some comments, and then read on. Listen for God's word to the church in the reading from the Gospel according to John, in the ninth chapter at the first verse. [READ ONLY John 9:1-7]

The incident begins, reasonably enough, with a question about the origin of suffering. The disciples express the conventional wisdom of their day (and one which persists today) that illness or hardship must be the result of sin, and they wonder, for the record, whether it was the man's own sin or the inherited sin of his parents that made him born blind.

But Jesus doesn't seem at all interested in a theological discussion about the issue: it isn't anyone's fault. Instead, he blends metaphor and medicine to show something about God—and about himself. “I am the light of the world” Jesus declares, and then rubs the man's eyes with a mud-and-saliva ointment and tells him to go wash it off, and when he does, he discovers that he can see.

If this were a movie, the theme music would come up; the camera would focus on the former blind man now gazing at Jesus with gratitude and insight; then pan the crowd of amazed and cheering onlookers. Jesus and the disciples would walk off into the sunset, and the credits would roll. Nice.

But no. Let's read on. [9:8-12] The first wave of opposition comes from the neighbors who just can't believe their eyes. They could easily represent the rationalists among us who like to know how things work and are rarely taken in by what they fear could be religious sleight-of-hand; spiritual voodoo. Research done by Willow Creek, one of the nation's largest “mega-churches” with 18,000 in weekly attendance, discovered that men don't like being religious in public. It's not that they don't hunger for connection to God, it's that in the company of women, men don't want to be ordered to sing, to say stuff, or to give. They don't like losing control. At the same time, Willow Creek learned that men are the critical predictor of family worship behavior; if they go, women and children tend to follow. Willow Creek has responded to the felt needs of men with subtle changes in the liturgy: instead of saying “Now let us bow in prayer,” the minister says “I'm going to pray, and you may want to join in.” As Pastor Bill Hybels put it, If you can allow men to bond, while maintaining the sense that everything is voluntary and unforced, they will commit. [from “*Jesus Christ's Superflock*” in *Mother Jones*, March/April 2005] Am I right in guessing there might be some brothers (and sisters too!) out there who struggle with worship when it invites us to give up control, who are suspicious of a religious vision predicated on faith, rather than facts, personal experience rather than scientific explanation?

The Biblical text now turns to the religious authorities for insight. I remind us contemporary hearers that when John speaks of “the Jews” he means specifically the ordained synagogue leaders, not a broad general reference to the chosen people. [Read John 9:13-34]

Now the scene shifts into argument and controversy. The religious leaders angrily accuse Jesus of breaking the law that forbid Sabbath labor. They interrogate first the man and then his parents to see if Jesus has promoted the connection people are sure to make—between his act of healing, and the role of Messiah who would “bring light to the world.” They quickly try to cut off any groundswell of support for this teacher and healer, and with the full force of institutional backing declare that whoever so much as mentions Jesus and Messiah in the same breath will be excommunicated from the Temple; that is to say, removed from community life and cut off from God.

What is interesting about this conflict, I think, is the two different directions the arguers take. The religious leaders grow increasingly rigid in their judgments; the former blind man's perspective gradually opens. To the Pharisees, Jesus' alleged "work" on the Sabbath outweighs the good he did for the blind man. How could this lawbreaker act on God's behalf? As if to get rid of evidence to the contrary, they drive the man out from their presence. In their religious certainty, their refusal to consider new possibilities—a new way of seeing—they remain limited and disabled.

But the blind man becomes the one who sees. At first he is tentative, relating just the facts ("He put clay on my eyes...I washed...I see.") He seems a little lost in the theological arguments of the preachers; he doesn't have the language to refute or affirm a position. Instead he tells what he does know: that once he was blind, but now he sees. In telling his truth, in witnessing to his own experience, his sight becomes clearer, and he discerns that Jesus is acting with God's authority "as a prophet."

Spiritual vision begins with a recognition of our blindness...that we don't know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth....so help us, God. Our doubts; our not-knowing, opens a space for God to come and help us. Sometimes with a flash of insight, but more often with a gradual dawning of awareness we come to see ourselves as we truly are....and we come to see who Jesus is. Though Jesus disappears from the story after the healing, he remains its central focus. The variety of responses to him—curiosity, fear, denial—can still be observed in contemporary life. Interestingly, the former blind man had never actually "seen" Jesus when he testified before the religious leaders with growing conviction. His insight comes at a cost, as he was cast out of the synagogue. Yet even in this rejection, he discovers he is not alone: [Read John 9:35-41 The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God]

No wonder this text has been a comforting one to those who have been banned, excluded, ostracized, marginalized! That's where Jesus will be present. No wonder this text calls us who are included, who run the show, who exercise control to consider the ways we are blind. In what ways do we deny other's experience? How can we let the light of the world shine from our congregation's ministry and mission? Could we offer our relative affluence and influence as a voice of moral conscience in our metropolitan community? Now, as then, the powers- that- be are threatened by truth-tellers and prophets. As this Lenten season wears on, we come ever closer to the cross, where the rulers of this world worked their worst to try and silence God's Word. The shadow of that cross still darkens our path, and we see its terrible consequences in the deep divisions in our civil life and the wars and violence that shatter the global community. Scholar, theologian and frequent commentator on the Tavis Smiley radio program, Cornel West has written that nothing can cure this condition of our collective soul short of conversion, the establishment of a love ethic at the heart of our community life [*Race Matters*, pp. 28-9]

What would such a love ethic look like? The gospel hymn we will sing during communion was written by the most unlikely example. John Newton, a career seaman engaged in the slave trade, bought captured people from West Africa and shipped them to be sold in slave markets around the world.

A fierce storm at sea, in which death seemed immanent, led Newton to a genuine conversion and a 180-degree change in his way of life. Until the time of his death at the age of eighty-two, John Newton never ceased to marvel at the amazing grace of God that had transformed him so completely. Shortly before his death, he is quoted as proclaiming, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!"

We make those same affirmations when we come to the Lord's table. We acknowledge that we are lost and blind; we need a light to guide our way. Because our memories are short, we remember—yet again!-- Christ's great love that reconciles us with God and unites us across human barriers of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and any other realities that keep us apart. We proclaim God's amazing grace and love which makes us all brothers and sisters. Let God guide our feet to this feast of abundance where there is room for everyone. Let God guide our feet to a place where people will gather from east and west and north and south, where men, women, children and youth of every race and nation, of every human condition, will live together in peace. Let God guide our feet into paths of righteousness that we may do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God all our days.

And if you are not sure of the way, listen to the words of a wise woman writing at the beginning of the last century: *I asked the prophet who stands at the gate of the year, "Give me a lamp that I may tread safely into the unknown." And the prophet replied: "Go out into the darkness, and place your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you as light, and safer than any known way."*

TO JESUS CHRIST, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD, WHO LOVES US AND FREED US FROM SIN BY HIS CROSS AND MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM, TO HIM BE GLORY AND POWER FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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