

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes  
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year A)  
**On Actions, Not Just Words, in John's Gospel**

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Reflection on  
**John 9:1-41**

**T**here's always three sides to a story, the saying goes. When it comes to the Gospels, there are sometimes four. Aren't we lucky to have such *diversity*!

There's a legend circulating in Catholic theological circles about a remark made by the late Avery Dulles during his 1969 St. Louis University Bellarmine Lecture. "Had there been a Holy Office at the time the Gospels were written," he quipped, "we Catholics would have just *one* Gospel in our Bibles: Mark, because it was the first one written. But in our history books we'd often find references to three notorious early Christian heretics named Matthew, Luke, and John." They probably would have been lumped together with the apocryphal Gospels of Thomas and Mary Magdalen.

Fortunately the Holy Office did not exist back when the early Christians were discerning their canonical texts.

On the topic of *diversity*, theologian John Karban points out that when Matthew, Mark, and Luke recounted Jesus' miracles, they made clear that there was a prerequisite—*faith*—expected before the miracle could occur. In Mark's theology, for instance, faith is so essential that in Chapter 6 he states, "[Jesus] was not able to perform any mighty deed there [in Nazareth], apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith." In the synoptic tradition, people's faith either empowers or restricts Jesus' miraculous actions. But that's not the case for John.

Going against the earlier wisdom, John has a "show me" attitude. (Maybe we should

think of him as the Evangelist from Missouri.) He seems to have been OK with the idea that faith really only came to the blind beggar *after* Jesus had worked his sign, not *before*.

We see this newfangled theology clearly at the end of Jesus' first Johannine miracle: the changing of water into wine at Cana. "Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs, and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him."

Not only does John's Jesus *not* demand faith, at times he doesn't even expect someone to ask for a miracle. Today's story provides us with a classic example. The "person born blind" is introduced to us as a mere subject of curiosity on the part of the Apostles. They ask Jesus a question that *reflects their limited*, you might say *bi-polar, world view*: They want to know whom to blame for the blindness—whose sin brought it about: the blind person's? or the parents? Of course Jesus opens them up to a third possibility—a different way of seeing things.

Didn't Jesus do the same thing in last week's gospel, when the Samaritan woman confronted him with an either/or situation?

Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship Abba God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. . . but in Spirit and truth."

At any rate, the beggar seems to be minding his own business when Jesus and his disciples approach. Jesus suddenly makes some

spittle-paste, smears the clay on the beggar's eyes, and says to him, "Go wash in the Pool of Siloam." It's at this point that the man's faith journey begins. Step by step, the soon-to-be sighted beggar starts the process that will eventually lead to his believing in Jesus as the Messiah.

Among other things, John is helping us to understand that Christian faith isn't something that flips on easily, like a light. It can and should develop and deepen over time—and our spiritual growth is usually the result of experiencing not just words, but also "signs" . . . often at the hands of others.

This brings us to the matter of *words vs. signs*. Jesus was very good at both, but he shows us in this gospel that *actions speak louder than words*. Jesus probably knew that the last thing the person born blind needed that day was a sermon or a parable. So he responded to the situation with an *action* (although work—even the charitable work of *curing* people—was a *no-no* on the Sabbath). Jesus must have sensed from the blind beggar a call to *do something!* Don't just talk! *Do something!* It reminds me of the call that Liza Dolittle would address to Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*:

Sing me no song! Read me no rhyme!  
Don't waste my time, *show me!*  
Don't talk of June, don't talk of fall!  
Don't talk at all! *Show me!*

That leads us to one other point about John's unique "miracle theology." He never calls Jesus' actions "miracles." He always refers to them as "signs." A sign is something which shows that *something else* exists. It's a pointer. It's perhaps like an icon—an image *through which* you look so as to be able to enter into the spiritual reality it represents. There's always something more *behind* or *beyond* it.

I would like to suggest that *enlightenment*—in the broadest sense of that term—is what underlies today's Gospel story. It's not

just about sight. Before the sign (or the miracle) happens, Jesus proclaims, "While I am in the world, I am the *light* of the world." Then, after the now-sighted beggar worships him, Jesus announces, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those *who do not see* might see, and those *who do see* might become blind." His teaching goes beyond light and sight, I believe, to what's called the "third eye" in the Hindu tradition—the eye of wisdom.

How appropriate, then, were the verses of our gathering song today, *Christ be our light!* "Longing for light, we wait in darkness. Longing for *truth*, we turn to you." I want to thank Joanna and Christine and Anne for enabling us all to sing these wonderful words.

In closing, let me open up a bit the idea of where *seeing* fits into the larger context of Christian life by recalling with you a beautiful, simple, medieval prayer attributed to Bishop Richard of Chichester, who died in 1253. It goes like this:

*Day by day,  
Dear Lord, of thee three things I pray:  
To see thee more clearly,  
Love thee more dearly,  
Follow thee more nearly,  
Day by Day.*

Learning how to *see*, in this perspective, is the necessary *beginning* of a process that also includes learning how to *love*, and then learning how to *follow*.

Perhaps we can sing a conclusion to this reflection by recalling those ancient words in the contemporary *Godspell* setting by Stephen Schwartz. It's easy to remember the sequence of petitions in this prayer by mapping them to one's body: see (point to your eyes) – love (point to your heart) – follow (point to your feet).

*(We sing "Day by Day" together, twice,  
as I walk back to pew)*