

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
BMPC – March 30, 2014
4th Sunday in Lent
John 9:1-41

Invisible

It only happened for about a month. And though it felt like an eternity, in hindsight, a month passes in the blink of an eye. But at the time, I thought one month was about as long as I could take. It was mid-May of 2007. I had been diagnosed with severe vocal chord nodules. I had ignored it for so long that by the time I finally went to see the doctor, he told me I really had two choices. I could have surgery to remove them and risk permanent vocal chord damage—a rare thing, but tell that to Julie Andrews.

Or, I could be completely and totally silent for an entire month and hope that vocal rest would allow them to heal. I chose option B. So for the next four weeks, I pastored and parented without a literal voice—using a whiteboard, communicating by facial expressions, whatever it took to get my points across. The most difficult part, however, was not being unable to read and sing to my kids at night, though I missed that terribly; and it was not that I could not preach, though I grieved that too; no, the most difficult part was becoming invisible. I had never been invisible in my life. I have always made my presence known for better and for worse. So all of the sudden, when people started looking past me or talking about me rather than to me, I was taken aback. I did not understand what was going on until it finally sunk in.

Since I could not speak, most people assumed I could not hear. And when they thought I could not hear, I became invisible. Wait staff at restaurants would come and ask Greg questions about what I wanted to order, without ever acknowledging I was even at the table. Or people would treat me like a child, obvious pity in their faces, not quite knowing what to do with me since I could not respond like a “normal” person. In public spaces that month, since I literally had no voice, I figuratively had no voice and no place as well. It was incredibly lonely. Like I said, I had never been invisible before. Because of my inability to speak, all of the sudden, I was experiencing life in a very different way than most other people experience it since most people can see, and hear, and speak.

Now, I am very aware that my experience of living in that reality lasted only a month. We have people in this congregation who could tell us their own stories of visibility and invisibility. We have members who, like the man in our Scripture, have been blind since birth or early childhood, or whose vision is declining more and more each day. We have people in this church who grew up in silent homes punctuated by Sign Language but not by spoken word. All of them could tell you much more than I about what it is like to live in a world that is different than what most people experience. And I dare not compare my brief experience to theirs’. It would be like saying I knew how the blind man must have felt that day he met Jesus. I do not. I only had a taste of what it is like to be invisible, to not have a voice, to be seen as less than whole.

But with that taste lingering in my mind, I can tell you that what always captures me in this story is the beginning. I am always caught off guard by a powerful reaction to the simple words “Jesus saw a man blind from birth.” Jesus saw him. My brief experience always causes me to wonder how many others did **not** see him—at least not as a whole human being. How many

people walked by him on a regular basis, ignoring the fact that due to his situation in that day and in that time, he had to ask for money just to survive.

Did they rush by him, acting as if they did not know he felt the vibrations of their footsteps as they quickly passed, pretending they were the ones who could not see him? Did they stop and stare at him sometimes, thinking he was unable to sense they were there, treating him as an object of curiosity rather than as a human being? Did any of them kick over his cup or take the money for themselves, muttering something about beggars cannot be choosers or other nonsense like that? What was the blind man's experience of the world before that day Jesus saw him? Did he ever feel invisible simply because the way he went through the world differed from most other people?

I also wonder what he must have thought at the moment Jesus saw him. The blind man was simply going through a regular day. Perhaps he heard the voices of the disciples. Maybe he caught the sound of Jesus' own voice. He might have felt the vibrations of their footsteps as they got closer and assumed he would just keep feeling them as they walked further away, like everyone else. So did he catch his breath, cock his head, and wonder what was going on when he realized the vibrations had stopped because Jesus was standing in front of him?

Surely he heard the disciples ask that question. It is the question people ALWAYS tend to ask in the presence of the heartbroken: Whose fault is it? It is the question we humans seem to be driven to ask after events like earthquakes and hurricanes, cancer diagnoses and heart attacks, babies born blind and teenagers in depression. Even if we do not give it voice, most of us assume someone must have messed up something for such a thing to occur. It has to be someone's fault. Because if it isn't, then that means something so life-altering could happen even to us. So someone must be to blame. It needs to make sense. Did his mother not eat a proper diet during pregnancy? Did his father smoke and drink? Did he, as a baby in utero, somehow twist himself into a strange position and get the cord wrapped around his neck? Whose fault is it—his or his parents—that he is blind, and therefore has to go through the world in a way that is different from everyone else? It must be someone's fault or else none of us is safe.

Given how often that question is asked, the blind man must have held his breath in order to focus even more clearly on Jesus' response. What would this one say, he wondered, and would it be any different than all the others? "No one sinned," Jesus stated, so matter of fact that the blind man almost did not trust his own sense of hearing. "There is no cause-and-effect here." Jesus continued, "So instead of wondering why, why don't we ask 'Now what?' Let's look instead at what God can and is doing in his life. That is the question to ask. You people have got to move past your need for simple causative explanations. Life as creature is not that simple or safe."

And then Jesus did something that no one—neither the disciples nor the blind man—expected. He bent down, made the mud paste, smeared it on the eyes of the man, and told him to go and wash it off. It was a strange thing to do. Strange because it was putting mud on his eyes with no explanation as to why. But also strange because the man did not ask for it. Thus far, the man has not spoken. We have not heard his voice. He did not call out to Jesus for help. He did not

demonstrate any knowledge he even knew who this Jesus was. He did not respond to the ignorance of the disciples' question.

He had just been present, almost as a bystander in the whole thing—something he had grown very used to since most folks did not see him as a whole, human being anyway. He was always rendered invisible to others around him even though they could technically see and he was technically blind. So it was strange, liberating?, that Jesus saw him and then touched him, doing something for him even if he did not understand it. For the first time in a long time, he had been seen and had been empowered to be an actor again in his own life. “Go,” Jesus said, “Wash at the pool of Siloam.” And with hands guiding him to the water the man immediately did as Jesus said, something we ought to notice. And he went. And he washed. And he saw. And everything changed.

All of the sudden, he realized he was going to have to learn a new way of being in the world. His old way of life would no longer work the same way. He had to learn how to navigate as a sighted person now, instead of as a blind person. It was different, new, probably scary. But just as scary were the reactions he immediately received. He did not have much time to reflect on it, but as soon as he was able to see, he was seen. Sort of. Most people did not know what to do with him. His neighbors argued over whether or not he really was who he was—to me their argument merely highlights how he had indeed been invisible to them. Some of them did not recognize him since he was no longer in his proper place as the blind beggar. Goodness it is hard for us to let people change, isn't it.

It was so hard for those who daily saw him without actually seeing him to understand what happened that they decided to take him to the religious leaders. Maybe their leaders could make sense of it. But alas, the religious leaders were just as perplexed because they also could not explain it. And when we religious leaders get perplexed and feel like things are out of our control and beyond our theological explanations, then we often get angry. And that anger lead us to tighten up the rules, to pass more amendments, to bring ecclesiastical charges against each other. All in the name of being decent and in order.

And that is, of course, what the Pharisees did. “How did this happen?” they asked the man, most of them seeing him for the first time though he had probably been a part of that faith community since birth. And after the newly sighted man told them about Jesus, the mud, and the pool, they focused their attention on the protagonist, Jesus himself. Where is he, they wondered, and how dare he break the rule in order to mix mud on the Sabbath! But their concern really is just a different side of the coin from the disciples' initial question. When the disciples faced what they considered a tragedy, they focused on whose fault it was, the **why**, rather than on the **how** God was at work in the blind man's life already. And when the Pharisees faced what they could not explain theologically or otherwise, they chose to focus on the **how** part—the mixing of mud, the breaking of Sabbath practice rather than the **why**—the seeing, the healing, the restoration, the fact that God in Jesus sees and claims everyone, especially those we render invisible or voiceless.

His parents even get brought in and questioned. And though most interpreters, including the Gospel writer himself, attribute their lack of response to fear and scape-goating, one

commentator claims something else entirely. She claims their response of “ask him yourself” is actually a move of great love and empowermentⁱ. It is sort of like what Greg would do as we sat at a table in a restaurant. When the wait staff would ignore me and ask him what I wanted, “Ask her yourself,” he would respond, helping me reclaim my voice and my place at the table. So when the newly sighted man’s parents tell the authorities to “ask him what happened,” I wonder if they were not doing whatever they could to help him claim his own voice again, to be the primary actor in his own life again, and to act in protest against all those days and years of being invisible. “He is right here in front of you. He is and always has been whole. Ask him, not us.”

So they do. And even though by this point the man had grown in great confidence and had even grown in faith, claiming Jesus was a prophet and a man of God, one he wanted to follow, few of the religious folks were convinced. As a matter of fact, they seemed to get angry at the man’s new confidence. They could not believe he dared to speak to them that way. **They** were the ones with the voices. **They** were the ones to be seen. **They** were the ones who had the seats at the table. **They** were the ones with the power and who knew about God and about faith and about other things he knew nothing about since he was still just a blind beggar in their eyes and never would be anything other than invisible, regardless if he could see or not. “Throw him out!” they declared. “He is still nothing in our eyes. We refuse to see him any differently.”

And they threw him out. His faith community threw him out. And wouldn’t you know it—that is when Jesus saw him again. This time, though, Jesus did not just see him. Jesus sought him and found him. And as the good religious folks grew in their determination not to see anything new about God or about those whom God saw, the newly sighted man finally laid eyes on Jesus and worshiped. And he was changed, healed, made whole, forever. But not because seeing is believing. Some of us don’t have that option. But because being willing to believe is seeing. And that can include us all.

ⁱ Kathy Black qtd in Frances Taylor Gench’s Encounters with Jesus. Louisville: WJK Press, 2007. Pages 78-79.