

Fresh Sight

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
Refreshment Sunday
Holy Communion
April 3, 2011

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:6-14; John 9:1-41

Text: "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." -- John 9:25

I'm told that parents often find themselves in the middle of someone else's fight. First the raised voices, then the shouting of "No!" or "Stop!" or "Give that back!" Then perhaps the sound of a smack or a thud or a slammed door and then the sound of running feet and finally wailing and tears. Here we go again, you think to yourself, as you prepare to investigate, or as you decide to wait until the more aggrieved party comes to you. This is one of those classic parenting responsibilities which I am perennially grateful not to have.

But none of us escapes being drawn into conflicts not properly our own. The United States is at this moment actively part of three military engagements around the world – three too many for some of us – and the signs coming from Syria, Bahrain, Jordan, Yemen, and elsewhere are that the moral dilemma that took us into Libya may confront us in other places as well, and what will we do when the civilians threatened with massacre are Syrians or Jordanians or Yemenis?

Domestic or global, conflict presses itself upon us and we are perpetually engaged in the struggle to understand who's right, who's the true victim, and whose actions or inactions have made them complicit in the suffering of others.

And now remove the conflict from us not only in space, culture, and religion, but by 2,000 years as well, and you begin to have a sense of the bewildering situation we face in our gospel reading from John. We have in this morning's reading yet another story of what looks like a run-in between Jesus, doing good, the religious authorities, being bad, and a blind man and his parents, with us, caught somewhere in the middle.

For that's where we twenty-first century, North American, Midwestern suburban Christians are in these stories – somewhere in the muddled middle. We never think of ourselves being in that spot, of course, because we always put ourselves in the company of Jesus and the others doing good. Occasionally – very occasionally – one of those in the company of those who get it might be one of the disciples, like Peter declaring boldly at Caesarea Philippi, "You are the Christ!" Or Thomas, cured of his doubt, exclaiming, "My Lord and my God!" That's us, we think, or at least we like to think.

And that's us, we think, or like to think, saying of Jesus in the blind man's words, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

"'Twas blind, but now I see." That's John Newton's famous rendition of the blind

man's words that we're going to be singing in a few minutes, and we'll reassure ourselves, with those words and with words like them, that our faith has made us well.

And we'll go on our way to Sunday lunch, as our ancestors for generations have done before us, forgetting that when it comes to applying the stories of conflict between Jesus and his religious establishment, we are the establishment. We are the Pharisees and the Saducees, and the scribes and the lawyers and the hypocrites.

Ouch – hypocrites. There's that word about which we church people are particularly sensitive. Hypocrites: people who say one thing and do another. None of us likes to think of herself or himself as that sort of person, and I daresay that most of us, individually, aren't.

Oh, we have our moments of failure, of course, but most of us are more than willing to admit that. We don't say one thing and do another; we say we are trying to do one thing – follow the way of Jesus – and that we sometimes make it and sometimes don't make it. We admit our failures and that keeps us from hypocrisy.

But as Reinhold Niebuhr and others have reminded us, when we get together, we often say and do things, or allow things to be said and done with our silent, complicit consent, that we would never do or say by ourselves. And that is where we leave ourselves open to the charge of hypocrisy.

One of the startling facts about the gospels is that of the eighteen occurrences of the word "hypocrite" in them, not once does Jesus use it to address a real individual person. When Jesus denounces religious people – that's us – for their hypocrisy, he always denounces their behavior as a group. Or as Niebuhr so famously put it in the language of his day in the title of one of his most influential books, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

The charge of hypocrisy stings, and it should, because it reveals a disconnect not only between what we say and what we do, but also and more damagingly between what we do as individuals and what we do as groups, in which we inflict and suffer so much more harm. One of the worst sins of the Christian west is the privatization of both sin and morality. If sin and morality were strictly matters of individuals, war, the worst evil in human history, would not exist, because it is not in an individual's power to wage war. Only groups wage war, and as Mark Twain said in the person of Satan in his short story "The Mysterious Stranger," "Two or three centuries from now it will be recognized that all the competent killers are Christians. . . ." And it's always worth remembering that the Hindu Gandhi said he would have been a Christian if it hadn't been for Christians.

Individually, we Christians aren't such a bad lot; collectively, however, we've often behaved abominably. We're pretty good at charity, we're not so good at justice. And not only in war. When we who live like princes and princesses wring our Christian hands at the suffering of the world while we steadfastly cling to the laws, institutions, policies, and customs that make that suffering inevitable, we are hypocrites, plain and simple. We give to charity with one hand while voting for the leaders who will keep injustice in place with the other. That is not what Jesus meant when he said do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. We cannot fix with charity the creation we are destroying with injustice. As St. Augustine said so long ago, "Charity is no substitute for justice withheld." For too long, we Christians have withheld justice from a misplaced reluctance to embroil ourselves in politics. But the price we have paid for our quietism is the shameful badge of hypocrisy for us and the heart-breaking suffering of the vulnerable.

There is nothing wrong with charity, which responds to the immediate needs of our neighbors. Jesus commended the good Samaritan and Christians have been pouring oil on the wounds of the injured ever since.

But at some point you need to fix the Jericho road. At some point you need to find

out why people fall victim to brigands on that lonely stretch of road so often that Jesus could use it parabolically. At some point you have to say enough throwing good money after bad and let's try to get to the bottom of this problem rather than keep throwing money at the foaming top.

And when you take that step – that important step of working not morally harder but morally smarter – you are moving from the realm of charity into the realm of justice. We are not called to leave charity behind, but we are called to open our eyes to the fresh sight of justice.

And in your bulletin this morning you will find two pieces of paper to help you do both of those things. One is the envelope for One Great Hour of Sharing, one of the five special offerings of our denomination about which we're going to say more in a couple of weeks. The envelope is for you to take home and pray about, think about, talk about with your loved ones, and then fill with whatever charitable gift you think you can afford to help our church in its global mission.

The other piece of paper is an action alert from Bread for the World, an organization that attempts to bring our private virtue into our public lives. It is an organization that works with our leaders, trying to remind them that they lead decent, compassionate people who are trying hard not to be hypocrites, who want to see their decency and compassion reflected in our nation's laws and policies. And we help Bread to do that by writing letters to our leaders reminding them that there is more than enough to go around if we will change the way we look at the world and make providing for the common good at least as important as fostering a culture of private gain.

The fresh sight that our world needs, we believe, comes through God's grace as the Holy Spirit, and we Christians who are committed to justice as well as charity are those who refuse to give up on ourselves when we are living our public selves. We refuse to join the army of those Christian soldiers "marching off to war, with the cross of Jesus left behind the door."

Jesus promised us that he would not leave us comfortless, and we believe that promise to be true. The Holy Spirit is our companion and guide, and its presence is all around for those with the fresh sight to see. Thanks be to God.