

How Far Does Our Faith Go?

- *Fourth Sunday of Lent*
- *April 3, 2011*
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Lent asks us to retrace our faith journey in company with those who are on their faith journey toward baptism at Easter. Each of us has a faith journey: we started somewhere, came along a certain way, and today are at a particular point on the path of our growth in faith. The question we are asked today is: “How far does our faith go?” Let’s explore that with the help and light of the gospel about the person blind from birth.

Let me ask us first of all to put our own name, the name we were given, on that conveniently unnamed person. As we follow the one born blind in his journey, let us follow also our own personal journey of faith.

He was literally blind from birth, lived in darkness, was forced to reflect inwardly because he could not see outwardly. All of us are also born blind in terms both of understanding ourselves and in terms of faith in God. Because we were created in the image and likeness of God—our dignity—we will never penetrate fully the mystery of our human identity because it shares in the mystery of the Triune God. No matter how much therapy we receive or self-clarification we undergo, we remain ultimately a mystery to ourselves, we are blind to our own created glory, cannot see it clearly. We are also not born with faith in God, it is not natural to us, we do not open our eyes believing in God; we are born blind to God; reflecting inwardly, even surmising, but not seeing.

Jesus sends the person to wash in the pool. He does this and comes back seeing. What this is in our faith journey is our own baptism, our own washing. In baptism we see something, but we do not yet have faith. Baptism gives us three things, three “C’s”: the capacity for faith, the community of faith, and the clothing in Christ. Baptism does not give us faith; we must come to faith by living our baptism, our washing in the pool, actualizing the initial capacity for believing we are given.

When asked by neighbors who it was who opened his eyes, the one born blind responds simply, “The man called Jesus.” That too was a likely stage in our faith journey; we were intrigued and attracted by “the man called Jesus”. As youngsters we were quite thrilled by him, the stories about him, what he said and did, and how he looked. This was a movement toward faith, maybe a lovely and necessary one, but it was not yet faith in him.

When pushed further by his neighbors asking, “Where is this man called Jesus?” our friend says again straight out, “I don’t know.” How familiar that is for much of our journey: “Where is Jesus; I wish I could find him; I wish I could put skin on him; I wish he would show himself.”

When taken to the synagogue and interrogated by the Pharisees, the one born blind responds to their question, “What do you have to say about him?” with “He is a prophet.” Now this is an advance, no longer just “the man called Jesus”, but one who speaks the words of God and does the powerful, healing, exorcising deeds of God, a prophet of God. How long did our journey of faith walk along these paths of seeing Jesus as the powerful prophet of God, to be taken notice of, perhaps the greatest person in history... but no more? This is getting closer to faith, but is not yet faith.

Now our friend, cornered more and more by the synagogue leaders, pressed hard to admit that anyone who made mud and healed on the Sabbath has to be a sinner, replies “I don’t know about that, but if one is devout and does God’s will, God listens to him; if he were not from God he would not have been able to do anything.” Getting still closer: more than a prophet, now seen as being from God, listened to by God, devout, only able to do what God allows. How long did we travel through the land of Jesus the holy one, the one from God, the one who prayed and to whom God listened? This is deeper, but it is not yet faith in Jesus. It’s on the edge of faith you might say.

The synagogue leaders throw our friend, as it were, over the edge by throwing him out of and excluding him from the synagogue and temple. For a Jewish man, this meant he lost the anchoring and orienting, the compass and community, of his whole Jewish life and faith. At this point, over the edge, come the sounds of the footsteps of faith. Jesus heard the man was thrown out, so he came and found him. He spoke directly to him the question of faith in the only understandable way it could be put to the person, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Teetering on the edge of faith, our frank fellow replies with a note of anxious hope in this voice, “Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” The address “sir” gives away that he is on the not-yet side of faith, but leaning close, hoping. Here comes the clincher: Jesus replies, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” Wowser! The one speaking with us along the whole journey of faith and who in a certain moment or situation makes known to us, “I am he”, trips the switch which allows finally our faith. The person born blind, who only now fully sees, accepts faith at last: “I do believe, Lord”, and he worshipped him”. No longer “sir”, but “Lord”; no longer “I do not know where he is”, but worships him then and there. You don’t worship “a man called Jesus”, or “a prophet”, or “a holy one from God”; you only worship God, Lord. He’s been thrown out of the religious anchoring of his life, out of the synagogue, thrown off base, but now has come home to faith in Jesus as Lord, and finds in him the new place of worship.

Asking ourselves on this Sunday in Lent, “How far does our faith go?” and putting ourselves in the place of this person to review his stages toward faith and our own personal faith journey, I hope we go this far, come to true faith, say right now, “I do believe, Lord” and gather to worship him. Are all of us this far and can any of us stay here securely in this believing? If not, then if we are as frank and true as this one born blind, we can be assured that Jesus will find us when we are thrown off our base of standing in ourselves and he will speak to us and allow us to come to or be renewed in faith in accepting him as the “Lord” he really is.

Don’t you wish you knew the rest of the story of this man? Was he still saying, “Lord” when he saw “the man called Jesus” on the cross; did he say, “I do believe, Lord” when he heard Jesus

had risen from death; did his faith go all the way so that he saw, loved, and served Jesus in others and gave his life to make Jesus as Lord known to all. Our gospel shows him brought all the way to faith, but it doesn't show the journey of faith beyond his coming to faith. That is a long journey for us too and that is the journey of the rest of Lent, of Easter, of Pentecost, and of our lives. Having been brought this far, let us hasten on, seeing what we see, and believing what Jesus, our Lord, has allowed to us to believe and to live.