



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Encounter

The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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I'd heard all my life that I was born blind, but I didn't really know what it meant. When you've never seen, you don't know what you are missing. It is impossible to imagine what "seeing" is when you've never done it. When all you know is dark, you can't comprehend light. All I knew was that it meant that there were lots of other things that I couldn't do as well. I couldn't work; I couldn't get anywhere new without help. I never expected to get married, because how could I support a family? People tended to treat me either with pity or as if I had done something wrong, although I wasn't sure what that might have been. I heard the word *sin* used a lot – directed at me and my family. My parents worried that somehow they were the cause of my blindness—some sort of retribution thing I guess.

And then one day, the most amazing thing happened. I was sitting in my usual place, holding my alms bowl, when I heard a group of men talking as they walked by. Then, as often happened, someone commented on my blindness and the topic of sin came up. One of the men sounded different and he told the others that my blindness wasn't about sin but about God's power. I wasn't sure if that made me feel any better – did he mean that God just wanted me to be blind? I sat very still, not reacting to their conversation, hoping that they'd drop a few coins in my bowl and just move on, but someone knelt down next to me. I heard him spit and thought "here we go again, someone mocking me for their own amusement." I could sense him still there, but of course I didn't know what he was doing—then he began to smear something on my eyes. Ordinarily, I would have pulled away and lashed out, but I didn't because somehow I knew that he wasn't trying to hurt or make fun of me. He told me to go down to the pool of Siloam and wash off my eyes. Fortunately, I knew the way and all the while I kept wondering why I felt so calm and so excited at the same time. At the pool, I made my way carefully down the steps, then reached down into the water and splashed it on my face, rubbing the stuff off of my eyes. The shock of the light when I opened my eyes made me jerk backwards. I ended up sitting in the water trying to understand what was happening to me. It took me a while to figure out that I was seeing – I was actually seeing. At first, none of what I saw made much sense to me. In fact, I had to close my eyes to re-orient myself. I put my hand on the wall and it felt familiar so I looked at it and saw the texture that I could feel and understanding washed over me. Then I realized what that man who spoke to me so lovingly had meant when he said that my blindness was for God's power to be shown. I fell to my knees and wept and prayed like I had never prayed before. Praise God. Praise God. And praise the one who gave me my sight.

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This man's story is one of many in the Gospels in which Jesus helps the blind to see. It is a central part of his ministry, his plan to reveal the Kingdom of Heaven, as it hides in plain sight in our midst. The desert theme of this fourth week of Lent is the *encounter* with something that we haven't seen or known or understood before. In the desert, after we have learned to embrace solitude, confronted our testing, and emptied ourselves, we are ready to encounter God and all of the ways that God in Christ is present in the world. John Moses says in the *Anthology for Lent* that "these encounters can only occur when there is an openness of mind, a generosity of spirit which enables us to find our life and our being in relation to others."

Last week I talked about all that we have to let go of to continue on this Lenten journey toward spiritual maturity. Jesus was willing to let go of his life so that we might not only understand how important his message was but also come to know that God's grace and kingdom are available to us, always.

When I was serving at the American Cathedral in Paris, I was asked to take part in a conference by the World Wildlife Fund of France. They had a very particular topic that they wanted me to help them understand, which was the 2002 advertising campaign "What would Jesus drive?" First they were mystified about why Jesus would be brought into something so mundane, they couldn't make a connection. Much of France is completely secular and so the religious and ethical implications of the question "What would Jesus drive?" made no sense to them. What did Jesus have to do with driving? What was the point of the whole idea? Realizing this particular French mindset and the fact that I was there as a woman priest – something equally incomprehensible to them—I knew that I had my work cut out for me. How could I help them understand it? Here's what I came up with.

There are two important American myths; the myth of the rugged individual who tamed the Wild West and is completely self-sufficient, and the great mythic place that cars occupy in our national psyche! They represent much more than transportation. They exemplify our independence; we can go anywhere, anytime we want. No waiting for bus or a train for us. Our cars communicate things about us, our aesthetics and sense of style; I am actually a red Miata with the top down in my heart of hearts. They tell the world how successful we are, that we stay up with the latest thing and can afford it. They help us relive our youth – Southern California is full of grown men driving tricked out muscle cars. Now cars even divide us into camps, the Prius drivers and the Hummer drivers. This was all pretty amazing to the French since their fundamental requirements for an automobile is that it has four wheels and will fit into tiny parking spaces. And then there's the price of their gas.

So basically I told my audience that the "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign was an attempt to get those for whom cars are so important to contemplate some of the lessons of



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the desert, starting with the effect that their driving preferences has on the rest of the population. The only way I could make a comparison for the French was food; how would agriculture be done if Jesus were a farmer today? Would *foie gras* even exist? Would Jesus be a chemical using corporate farmer? As soon as we were talking food, the lights went on, and they understood the message, though I am not sure how many of them relished the idea of confronting what effect their personal habits might have on the rest of humanity.

The concepts of living for others and dying to self challenge the memes by which American culture is organized. Christianity and individualism, the cult of the individual, are maddeningly antithetical. The Christian life is one of solidarity with those who are still awaiting the blessings of the kingdom in their lives. The sight that is needed to see that kind of life, to open our minds, will come to us when we learn how to recognize and challenge the myths that inform our lives—rugged individualism, total independence, success by the sweat of our brows, and even the somewhat Calvinist sounding Puritan work ethic. These are the things that must be dragged up to the cliff's edge and let go of if we are to see things through the eyes of the poor and those for whom those myths don't work. Christianity is a path of collaboration, not jockeying for position. It's not a race to see who wins; it's a journey of generous spirits in which we help others along the way. The Kingdom of Heaven will not truly come until it comes for everyone.

Please hear me clearly. I am not advocating that we give up our hardworking, fearlessly independent American nature, but just that we make sure we are not blinded by it. This is both/and theology in action again—we simply need to let go enough to allow the light into our eyes, so we can see how life is about concern for the other as much as concern for ourselves, cooperation with the other as much as forging our own ways in the world.

If we can do the necessary letting go, we will find ourselves feeling a bit like the blind man sitting in the pool of Siloam, trying to make sense of the shapes and movement before our eyes. It will take some re-orienting. But then as our vision clears, we will begin to see a world in which love is the most powerful thing and the only law that really matters. When we might begin to see Christ in the people we encounter, and in the mirror, when we gaze upon our own faces.

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