

Two cannibals are discussing recipes. The first says, "You know, I just can't seem to get a missionary tender. I've baked'em; I've roasted'em; I've stewed'em; I've barbecued'em. I've tried every sort of marinade and recipe on them. Nothing works."

The second cannibal asks, "What kind of missionary do you use?"

"You know, the ones that have those brown cloaks with a rope around the waist and they're sort of bald on top."

"Ah!" the second cannibal replies: "That's your problem. Those are friars!"

Christianity is, above all, a way of SEEING. Everything else in Christian life flows into and out of that transformation of our vision. Christians SEE differently, and that is why our prayer, our worship, our action, and our whole way of being in the world have a distinctive accent and flavor. What unites figures as diverse as James Joyce, Caravaggio, Catherine of Siena, the architect of Chartres, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King, jr., is a peculiar and distinctive TAKE on things, a style, a way, which flows finally from Jesus the Christ. Teilhard de Chardin said that his mission was to help people SEE, and Thomas Aquinas said that the ultimate goal of Christian life is a 'beatific vision,' an act of seeing.

In this strange and strikingly beautiful account of the healing of the man born blind, we find an icon – a representation of this coming to see. Jesus spits on the ground and makes a mud paste which he then rubs onto the man's eyes. When the man washes his eyes in the pool of Siloam as Jesus had instructed him, his sight is restored. The crowds are amazed, but the Pharisees accuse him of being naïve, and the one who healed him of being a sinner. With disarming simplicity the now-sighted man responds: "All I know is I was blind, and now I see." This is precisely what all Christians say when they have encountered the light of Christ, when they have awakened to the full meaning of what it means to be a baptized follower and disciple of Jesus. It was St. Augustine who saw in the making of the mud paste a metaphor for the Incarnation: the divine power mixing with the earth, resulting in the formation of a healing balm. When this salve of God made flesh is rubbed onto our eyes blinded by sin we finally come to see. (This adapted from AND NOW I SEE.....A THEOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION by Robert Barron, p 1)

So how are we blind? This is for each one of us to answer in our quiet moments of brutal self-honesty. But we must remember that WE have acceded to the chairs of the pharisees. We are the modern day version – the religious folk who are certain of our beliefs, who KNOW what is right and wrong or orthodox and heretical. How do we know if we are a pharisee? Here are some questions to ask.

Do we follow the tradition, certain that we can tell the true prophets from the false ones, the good priests and bishops from the bad ones? Are we guardians of the faith, law-abiding, pledge-paying, theologically correct people who are always looking to spot a heretic a mile away?

According to John, these are the people to watch out for, because they THINK they can see. Furthermore, they think they can see better than others, and they are not shy about telling others that they are not really seeing correctly, or that what they are seeing is wrong. They do not necessarily do this to be mean. They do this because they love God. They are doing it to protect people from believing the wrong things. Just read the letters to the editor in any Catholic publication and you will find a lot of these folks.

Scripture scholar, Raymond Brown, asks this question: "If Jesus came to any one of us today, would we recognize Him?" Would we follow Him? He points out that religious folk are always the ones who have the most difficult time recognizing Jesus - - because Jesus never fits into our religious categories. It's amazing, but somehow it seems that religion can almost blind us to the fact that God's ways are not our ways. Brown concludes that each of us has to be willing to unmask our blindness, but suggests that Jesus would NOT look like what we would expect, would not

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act like we would expect, and would definitely be in conflict with institutional stuff – religion and politics. Doesn't sound too promising for anyone of us.

But there is another layer to this seeing and not seeing. There are a lot of astounding things that happen in this world that may or may not have anything to do with the power of God. They may have only to do with the power of the human imagination, or the power of suggestion – or—worse yet – with the power of darkness. What if something is NOT God and I believe that it is?

That is a good question, and the answer is: We can get our souls into trouble. A wrong belief places our soul at risk. In official terms, we are in heresy. But according to the story of the man born blind, there is something worse than wrong belief, and that is wrong disbelief. What if something is God or of God and I DON'T believe that it is? I've actually had Catholics tell me that Pope Francis is a heretic. I'm astounded at the arrogance of that statement, especially if it comes from someone with no theological training. And it's even more astounding when it comes from cardinals in our church. We either believe that the man who sits on the chair of Peter came through the action of the Holy Spirit or we don't. We can't make an exception simply because we disagree with a particular pope.

The Pharisees forgot to ask these questions. They were so sure of everything: God did not work on Sundays, that Moses was God's only spokesman, that only Catholics could get to heaven, that all that tithing business is not for me, that if I just go to mass every week I'll definitely get to heaven – no matter how stingy I am to the poor and the church – and how self-absorbed I am in my own little life. And people think that they are seeing rightly.

Meanwhile, the man born blind, who was not sure about anything – he was the one who eventually saw the light. It was the one and only thing he was absolutely sure about: that he could see. If that made Jesus a heretic, then the blind man sincerely hoped he would be allowed to become one too.

WHAT IF SOMETHING'S NOT GOD AND I BELIEVE IT IS? WHAT IF IT IS GOD AND I DON'T BELIEVE? I do not know which question the blind man asked himself when Jesus was rubbing mud on his eyes, or whether he was too busy being healed to ask any questions at all, but I do know what he had to say afterwards. "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." (This very freely adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor, HOME BY ANOTHER WAY, p. 77-78)

So what's the remedy to all of this blindness? This is point 2. It's water. Baptismal water. The man is sent to wash in the pool of Siloam. This whole Lenten journey is to the water of Baptism for our elect, and for all of us who are already baptized, it is back to the waters to renew our baptismal promises, which we will do at all of the Easter liturgies. The Lenten season sends us to wash again in the waters of new life. But this important thing is still not even the baptismal water. It is what we do once we have been dipped! IT IS TO SEE THE WORLD IN A NEW WAY! It is what the baptized DO.

A Chicago pastor was giving a tour of his church to kids from a local Catholic High School. "What is the most important object in this church?" the priest asked. "The exit sign," one boy replied. The pastor sarcastically asked, "And why do you say the exit sign is so important?"

"Because," the student continued, "It shows us the direction in which to take the gospel." In that same spirit, and to the chagrin of the local fire marshal, the United Methodist Church of Worth, Illinois replaced all its exit signs with new ones that read: "you are entering the mission field; return when you need reinforcement." (INITIATIVES, September 1997)

And this is my third and final point, the name of the pool is SILOAM, a name which means SENT. The symbolism screams! The message is that the seeing are SENT. Once we are washed, we are to go out and DO something about it. To claim our way of taking Christ to the world. And as Catholics we have generally not been very good at this. We have tended to think of ministry or our mission as something that we do here in church. So we have Eucharistic ministers, and lectors and ushers and music ministers, etc. But that's just liturgical housekeeping. It's important work, and we

need it. But it is NOT our mission. It is NOT being SENT outside these walls to share our faith with others. We are washed in the pool called SILOAM – SENT!

And that sending doesn't mean preaching to people. I love the lines attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the gospel. Use words if you must." THAT'S the greatest of all preaching. Far more effective than anything I've ever done in a pulpit. It is to live this baptism washed life in such a way that others say "I want that in MY life." "Why are Catholics able to be so good in the face of so much adversity?" "What makes Catholics act in that way when so many others take the easy way out?" "What makes them so generous, kind, compassionate, forgiving, loving and inclusive toward all, even those who have hurt them?" The greatest preaching we will ever do is a life well lived, a life of love and grace and mercy and compassion and forgiveness and generosity and joy and peace.

One of the most important lines in the liturgy is the last: "Go in peace to love and to serve; Go in peace to glorify God with your lives." It's not just 'have a nice day.' No, it is a COMMISSION, we are SENT OUT from here to live out what we have celebrated in here. We don't come here on Sundays to 'get my Jesus,' we come here to be GOTTEN by Jesus. We don't come here to feel good or to be inspired – we come here to be fed – SO THAT we may go out to do His work and bring His love to others. Perhaps so many people leave Mass early because they simply don't want to be charged with such a mission. But charged we are, whether we like it or not.

Today we send out our 5 elect, who will celebrate their second scrutiny of preparation for their full sending at their baptism at the Easter Vigil – and all of us will be sent forth. So the church sends all of us out -- to see a need and meet it – to witness a tear and dry it – to recognize a hurt and reconcile it – to see someone hungry and feed them – to see a wound of spirit or body and bandage it – we are sent out – to go and give this to all we meet -- GO – you who are soon to be washed, our elect – and Go, you are NOW washed – you who now SEE – for you are now SENT to share this good news with others. Amen.