

Outside the box

John 9:1-41

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These cities we live in are full of eye-openers. More than once I've caught my breath in the delightful surprise of seeing a bald eagle wing its way up the river by the Franklin Street bridge. To have the occasional opportunity to see a painting like Franz Marc's *Large Blue Horses* or something like the present exhibit of women's veils from Pakistan in the MIA is to see something anew. And once again, theaters in these cities are an amazing resource: Park Square, Chanhassen, Penumbra, 10,000 Things, Jeune Leune, the Jungle. The list goes on.

Robin and I took in a show at the Guthrie the other night that by serendipity or providence—take your pick—was very much about the same kind of thing as this week's Bible story: seeing. Or to use Abraham Heschel's phrase: about *knowing what we see* rather than *seeing what we know*.

Third is the late Wendy Wasserstein's final play. It concerns Laurie Jameson, a brilliant, middle-aged woman who's a noted professor of literature at an elite New England college. She is established (though she would hate that term). Years ago she fought her way through the old boys club to the top tier of her profession. She's also ... caring for her father who has Alzheimer's, dealing with a largely absent husband whom she's surpassed professionally, is mother to two daughters, and in a rage about the invasion of Iraq. And she's about to have her world view shaken by a preppy jock who's taking her course on "Un-Corseting Elizabethan Drama."

Woodson Bull III seems to stand for everything Laurie stands against—the ease and prestige that come with being white, male, and moneyed, even of simply being not just Woodson Bull *Junior*, but Woodson Bull *the Third*. When Woodson Bull III turns in an eye-opening psycho-sexual analysis of *King Lear*, Laurie can't conceive that it could be his own work, and she accuses him of plagiarism. He simply doesn't fit into her boxes of perception. To paraphrase Heschel again, in Woodson Bull III (who goes simply by Third), she can only see what she thinks she knows. The set design reflects the play admirably—a simple and flexible backdrop, reminiscent of a box, on which visual clues to suggest the scene are projected. Brilliant. (And since the play is in part about plagiarism, let me be quick to point out that I didn't figure that out on my own! I read it in the director's and set designer's notes online.) Laurie can't see "Third" as anything but what he represents to her, "a walking Red state." (He's actually much more of a blend, just like Ohio, where he comes from.) In a way, Laurie is like her father, who cannot at times recognize the people in front of him for who they are. His affliction comes from dementia. Hers from certainty. To borrow a phrase from the play Third writes his essay about, she simply cannot see him feelingly. She has no compassion for this young man until her own eyes are opened.

She's not alone in this. Pastoral counselor Jaco Hamman writes that there are three ways we can regard other people. One is simply to refuse to see them. A second is to look *at* them, to regard them as objects. And a third is to be able to discover them for who they really are. For most of the play, Laurie is stuck seeing Third in a combination of the first two ways: she regards him as an object, not a person. But in so doing, she doesn't really see him at all.

Think of it another way. If you've ever tried to draw somebody, your first attempts probably included a nose that looked like you *think* a nose looks like, not what it actually does. And you probably put the eyes too high on the face because none of us really notices at first how much of the head is above the eyes. Or maybe you saw *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. (Maybe this scene is also in the book. I never read it.) The artist Vermeer is trying to get a young woman to really notice what she sees. Look at the sky and the clouds, he tells her, and tell me what you see. "Blue," she says. "And white." Look again, he says. And this time she sets aside her ideas of what color the sky and the clouds are supposed to be and she really *sees* the atmospheric light in front of her. "Gray," she says. "And yellow. And green." She has never been blind, but she is only beginning to see.

Foreign films in particular can help us to see in a new way. *Persepolis*—still showing in a theater near you!—is based on the autobiographical graphic novels by Marjane Satrapi. It shows her experience as an Iranian girl and young woman during the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. But it doesn't show us what we think we know. Ayatollah Khomeini is never mentioned or shown. For that matter Islam is never mentioned explicitly. We see the revolution through the eyes of a girl, and a brutal time through the eyes of strong women, young and old, women who still claim the freedom to be socially rebellious. The film opens our eyes to one young woman's experience, which is so different from what we might expect to see. And different in ways that we don't even expect.

Such is the boon of art, to help us see things we didn't expect, or to see in a new way. Mark Twain had a similar thing to say about travel: it's fatal to prejudice.

The story we heard a few minutes ago is also about blindness and bias. It starts with a common prejudice of the day: that blindness was a kind of punishment. If a child is born blind, then whose sin caused it? Right away Jesus pushes his audience into a new way of seeing. It's not about cause and blame, he says. Look for something different. Look to see whether God will be at work in this situation.

The questions that people ask in this story aren't always asked to bring new things to light. Maybe you've been in this kind of an argument, where people ask questions only to score points. And you can never get your point across because people are only listening for what they want to hear, something to prove their point. The religious authorities in this story ask questions not to see but to spin. There's also a kind of social blindness described in this story. Once the man is given sight, some people don't recognize him. Is this the same man who used to sit here begging? some ask. "It *looks* like him," some say. But others aren't sure. As long as the man was blind, some of these other people couldn't see him. As long as he was asking them for help, they turned their eyes away. And now that he's not so dependent, some of them aren't sure what he looked like before. How many times do we refuse to look people in the eye, to even make an attempt to see them as another human being?

There are other things going on in this story that we might not see because we just don't know the culture. From what I read,¹ it was a common practice in the Ancient Near East to spit on the ground to ward off the evil eye. As blind people were seen to be cursed, it was understood that they also could curse others. They bore the evil eye. And so to protect yourself, you might spit on the

¹ What I've learned about the use of spittle in the Ancient Near East and the ancients' understanding of light comes from "The Eyes Have It," by Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, published in *Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life*, Lent/Easter, RCL Year A, p. 63.

ground when you saw a blind person. Here Jesus comes upon a blind man, and he spits on the ground. But he does it to heal. He does it in preparation for coming in contact with this man, not as a way of keeping him away. And by working his saliva into the ground to make a plaster of mud he does two other things. First of all, he violates sabbath laws since the work of kneading anything, be it dough or dirt, was specifically prohibited in sabbath observance. And there may be an echo of the story of the creation of Adam here. Adam is said to have been formed out of dust and water by the riverbed. Here in a way Jesus makes of this man a new creation. He's given a new life through the gift of sight. As for breaking sabbath rules, there's a pretty irony in that those who violated the sabbath were seen by the authorities as distancing themselves from the works of God, and here Jesus is doing God's work of healing and fulfillment by working on the sabbath.

In John's gospel, Jesus is called the light of the world. People understood light differently back then. Light didn't come from some exterior source. You could see if you had light within you. If you were blind, then you had darkness within. In this healing, Jesus is doing God's work of bringing light and life to the blind man. Jesus' light shines into the darkness within, and the darkness does not overcome it. From the very first verses of his gospel, John sees Jesus as light.

Gail O'Day has written an eye-opening book on John's gospel.² She says John has a very different understanding of sin than the other biblical writers. For John, sin isn't a moral failing. This is hard for us to conceive sometimes because it goes against so much that we've been taught, so much that we assume, even if we rebel against it. Her point is not that this is the only way to think about sin, but it is to say that this is an equally legitimate biblical definition. I've preached on this before, but it's so countercultural that it's worth the reminder. Sin isn't a moral failing, according to John. Sin comes in simply not perceiving that God is present in Jesus.

Now, some people take that and turn it into a moral issue again: If you don't believe in Jesus you're guilty and you're going to some eternal punishment. But recall the beginning of this story again. Jesus isn't looking to blame. He's looking to enlighten. He's wanting to help us see. And what he keeps saying throughout the Gospel According to John is that if you see me, you see God. Again, it's not to claim some sort of divinity for himself. It's to show what God is like. When we hear a story of Jesus healing, we're to see that God heals. When we hear a story of Jesus feeding people, we're to see that God provides. When we hear a story of Jesus loving people, we're to see that God is love. I think people miss the point when they insist that Jesus is God (as much as that's a part of traditional Christian doctrine). The point throughout this gospel as I understand it is not that Jesus is God, but that Jesus comes *to make the works of God visible*.

If this is so, then salvation can be found not primarily in some land beyond the sky, but in the fullness of this life, where God is so very much at work. Maybe this forces us out of the boxes we've constructed to rule our perceptions. But maybe it also helps us to see things that we'd never noticed before.

We all have eyes to see. Let us see.

² The reference is to her commentary on the Gospel According to John in Volume IX of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*.