

“In the Thick of Blindness”

You're stuck at a stop sign trying to turn onto a busy street. Doesn't it sometimes seem as though the folks driving on that busy street are terribly inconsiderate. Not one wants to slow down and let you in. But, the strangest thing happens. Now you are the one on the busy street and along the way people are at stop signs trying to get in. Seems like they are rude and pushy trying to force their way in. Hmmm — the identity of the "bad guys" is very dependent on where I happen to be stuck!

John Jewel writes about a different, yet related, experience: *“Some years ago, an assistant pastor at a large church I attended held the opinion that God rewarded ‘good’ Christians and punished ‘bad’ Christians. When people didn't tow the line the way he thought they should, he would comment, ‘The Lord's going to whip you, he can give you a heart attack just like that!’ If he used that line once, he used it a thousand times. A young couple that had missed church for three months because they weren't ready to bring the baby to church was told, ‘You had better be careful. The Lord can take a baby away as easily as he can give one you know.’ I must confess that it was no easy task to hold the tiniest sense of satisfaction in check when this fellow was taken to the hospital with a massive heart attack! Personally, I don't think God gave him the heart attack. It was much more likely his well known love of greasy fried foods. One good thing did come out of this episode (which he survived). Never again was the phrase, ‘The Lord's going to whip you . . .’ heard to emerge from his mouth.”*

Jesus is talking about blindness in today's gospel lesson. Not physical blindness, but the kind of blindness where you shine a bright light on other people's sin and keep your own in a perpetual brownout. It's somewhat like driving home on a dark night, complaining that all the headlights coming at you are so much brighter than your own. Honestly now ... Have you ever thought or even said something like, *“I sure hope he (she) gets what's coming to him!”* Of course you have. Jesus is talking

to people who are saying in effect, *“Sure was something about those folks in Galilee, wasn’t it? They must have really screwed up!”*

Jesus' answer grabs our attention — if we're paying attention. I think about our son, Levi, when he was little and we would call up the stairs to find out either what that crashing noise was or why the deep silence, and he would reply, *“Don’t call me now!”* I think of that when I hear Jesus proclaim, *“. . . I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did . . .”* There's a challenge here. We might not want to hear it.

Maybe we can begin to deal with what seems to be a tough message if we think of it this way. Would you feel comfortable walking into the presence of God Almighty, shaking your fist and demanding, *“I want what's coming to me!”* Neither would I! There's a reason for that. When we are alone with ourselves, without our usual defenses, we realize that we are very much in need of the grace of God. At least most of us come to this realization.

Maybe you have heard about the pastor who really wanted to get a message through to one of her stubborn deacons that he was a stumbling block to the congregation because he was so argumentative in the meetings. The pastor preached a sermon in which she really came down hard on stubborn argumentative folk. At the conclusion of the sermon, the deacon said, *“That was a wonderful sermon pastor, too bad there weren't more people in worship to hear it.”* She tried again, with a slightly different slant at a small prayer group when it was time for the devotion. The deacon called her aside after the meeting and said, *“That devotion touched my heart pastor, I think the people could really use more of that. Why don't you preach on the subject some Sunday.”* *“I just can't win,”* the pastor thought. But finally her chance came. It was a cold Sunday morning when one of the worst blizzards to ever hit the area hammered the town. No one was able to get to the worship service — except for one person; guess who? *“Thank you Lord, here's my chance!”* the pastor prayed within as she rushed back to her office to dig out her notes on the theme of stubborn, argumentative people and how they harm

the church. She delivered the sermon with commanding enthusiasm. At the close of worship, the deacon came to the pastor with a downhearted look on his face. A hard-won sense of accomplishment began to swell within the pastor when the deacon said sadly, *“Pastor, that is one of the finest sermons you've ever preached. It's just a darn shame they weren't here to hear it!”*

Unfortunately, we all can become impervious to correction, because it is sometimes difficult to hear the word God would like for us to hear. In plain talk, Jesus is saying to us in today's lesson: Do you really think you are better than others? Take a serious look at yourself! God's grace offers you an opportunity to change!

Do you really think you are better than others?

Think back to the beginning of today's Gospel: *“. . . there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.”* How did that subject come up? If you looked back just a bit in the previous chapter in Luke you would see Jesus coming down pretty hard on hypocrisy. He is warning people that His coming will bring division and conflict. His listeners were likely feeling the heat and wanted to change the subject. You know how that works! Remember the woman at the well? When Jesus asked her to produce her husband, she didn't really want to talk about her five ex-husbands or current boyfriend so she changes the subject with something like, *“So tell me what you think about Lutherans?”*

Jesus levels the playing field. The Galileans who suffered were not worse than other Galileans. People who endured Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami (remember them?) or starvation or any other disaster are not the bad guys. They are not worse than the rest of us. Bad things, indeed do happen to good people (of course, that term is relative). The next time you are tempted to look down on someone — no matter how desperate they may be, try this adaptation of Jesus' words, *“When you looked with scorn on the least of these, you looked with scorn on me!”*

So, take a serious look at yourself!

Jesus moves right into our insides when he says, ***“I tell you, unless you repent . . .”*** When I'm looking at the Galileans or the Sodomites, or the terrorists or the insurgents . . . I don't feel like such a bad guy. Most people I've ever heard compare themselves with others seem do it in terms like, *“Well I've never hurt anyone or robbed a bank or taken a life.”* Do you recall ever hearing something like, *“You know, when I look at Ghandi, or Mother Theresa, I feel a little selfish.”*

Jesus is a mirror. A crystal clear, undistorted reflection of who we are. In him we see everything we could be if we lived our lives in closer harmony with him. The words of the song from Godspell, “Day by Day,” were to the point. *“Day by day, O dear Lord, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly . . .”* That's the meaning of repentance. To look at ourselves in the person of Jesus Christ and have a genuine heart's desire to have His Spirit shape our lives. Otherwise, we perish!

“Wait a minute,” you might say, *“That sounds a bit like, ‘the Lord's going to whip you’!”* Not really. Jesus is simply affirming a changeless spiritual truth. *“It doesn't matter what anyone else does or what happens to anyone else. You are responsible for your own spiritual life. Unless you live your live in harmony with the One who made you, you are headed for spiritual disaster!”*

It's not a matter of vengeance or an angry God waiting to get hold of you. It's simply the way it works. A fish out of water will perish and a human spirit without God perishes. This isn't cruelty or even punishment — it's reality. But wait . . . there's more.

God's grace offers you an opportunity to change!

Jesus tells a story, as Jesus often does. The story says the authenticity of our inward relationship with God is expressed in our actions. St. James said it this way, ***“You must be doers of the word and not hearers only.”*** In the gospel of John it's Jesus saying, ***“I am the vine and you are the***

branches.” The fruit that is borne by the branches is the result of the life of the vine. The actions of our living demonstrate the reality of the life of Christ in us. Thus, *“No fruit, no root!”* If there is no fruit, there is no authentic life in the branches. If there are no figs, there is no real “fig life” in the wood. The wood is just wasting space in the orchard. The owner of the vineyard in Jesus' story has every right to ask that the barren tree be removed. As a matter of fact, as a business person, he would be foolish to let barren trees take up valuable production space.

Here's grace. The one who tends the vineyard asks for an opportunity to nourish the tree into a turnaround; that's repentance. *“Give me a chance to help this tree become what it was created to be,”* the gardener says. Jesus is the one who comes from God to nourish us and to help us become what we were created to be. But we must allow him to penetrate our tendency to spiritual blindness. So what do we do with that tendency? How do we combat it? Give yourself the gift this week of time to reflect on some fundamental questions for your life:

- ➔ Does the outward expression of my life reflect Jesus Christ in any way? How exactly?
- ➔ Are there any areas of my life which not only do not show the reality of Christ, but actually hinder Christ in me? How exactly?
- ➔ What is the most important change you would like to see in your life that would represent a turnaround (repentance) for you?

Ask God to help you build your inner life in a way that will enable you to allow the life of Christ to show through your life! This can be a painful process — especially if you haven't taken a deep look within for some time. So keep in mind that Christ is right there with you. He loves you, and no matter what surfaces from the past or present, that love never varies, never changes, never loses its intensity, never gives up. Even when we stumble around in the darkness of sin, and denial, and confusion, Jesus is there with us — in the thick of things.

Amen.