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“Seeing Jesus”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year A)

March 26, 2017

John 9:1-41

The “This Day in History” website tells us that:

On [April 12], 1633, chief inquisitor Father Vincenzo Maculano da Firenzuola, appointed by Pope Urban VIII, begins the inquisition of physicist and astronomer Galileo Galilei. Galileo was ordered to turn himself in to the Holy Office to begin trial for holding the belief that the Earth revolves around the Sun, which was deemed heretical by the Catholic Church.

This was the second time that Galileo was in the hot seat for refusing to accept Church orthodoxy that the Earth was the immovable center of the universe: In 1616, he had been forbidden from holding or defending his beliefs. In the 1633 interrogation, Galileo denied that he “held” belief in the Copernican view but continued to write about the issue and evidence as a means of “discussion” rather than belief. The Church had decided the idea that the Sun moved around the Earth was an absolute fact of scripture that could not be disputed, despite the fact that scientists had known for centuries that the Earth was not the center of the universe.

This time, Galileo’s technical argument didn’t win the day. On June 22, 1633, the Church handed down the following order: “We pronounce, judge, and declare, that you, the said Galileo... have rendered yourself vehemently

suspected by this Holy Office of heresy, that is, of having believed and held the doctrine (which is false and contrary to the Holy and Divine Scriptures) that the sun is the center of the world, and that it does not move from east to west, and that the earth does move, and is not the center of the world.”

Along with the order came the following penalty: “We order that by a public edict the book of Dialogues of Galileo Galilei be prohibited, and We condemn thee to the prison of this Holy Office during Our will and pleasure; and as a salutary penance. We enjoin on thee that for the space of three years thou shalt recite once a week the Seven Penitential Psalms.”

Galileo agreed not to teach the heresy anymore and spent the rest of his life under house arrest. It took more than 300 years for the Church to admit that Galileo was right and to clear his name of heresy.¹

A few years ago, Margaret Heffernan gave a TED Talk on willful blindness. She told the story of the town of Libby, Montana, and a woman who lived there, Gayla Benefield. In the course of her work as a meter reader, Gayla discovered a high number of men at home during the day, unable to work, and on oxygen tanks. She thought this strange, so she decided to look into some other unusual events in her town. Her curiosity led her to the vermiculite mine in Libby. Before long, she discovered that vermiculite, which lined the town’s gardens, playgrounds, and sidewalks, and provided insulation in all their buildings, was a toxic form of asbestos. She began to raise the alert, but the townspeople listened to her as much as they would have listened to Chicken Little crying out, “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” They wrote her off as a crazy woman with a crazy idea in her head. She annoyed them so much with her crazy-talk that a bunch of them got together and made bumper stickers that read “Yes, I’m from Libby, Montana. No, I don’t have asbestosis.”

Gayla, however, knew something was wrong, so she told her story to a visiting scientist, who believed her, conducted further tests in his lab, and came back to Libby to screen 15 thousand people in 2002. The results of the screening showed

¹ <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/galileo-is-convicted-of-heresy>

that Libby had an 80% higher mortality rate than anywhere else in the United States. Even with that information, however, the people in the town didn't want to believe the truth which was right in front to them and for years continued to deny that there was an asbestos problem in Libby. They chose instead what Heffernan refers to as "willful blindness."

The term "willful blindness" is technically a legal term and refers to those who choose to avoid knowing such things that would cause them to be liable in a legal case. It has also been expanded beyond the legal system to describe the mindset of those who choose to ignore certain evidence or information in front of them because it is frightening, or unsettling, or would require major (or even minor) changes or sacrifices if acknowledged.

As we remember the story of Galileo, we can see how willful blindness caused the Roman Catholic Church to ignore the scientific evidence around them which clearly showed that the earth moved around the sun and not the other way around. The cost would have been too high for the Church to admit they were wrong. It would have required that they reconstruct their entire way of thinking about what scripture said about the universe. Willful blindness was the easier way.

It took the Catholic Church 300 years to admit they were wrong and to clear Galileo's name. That's a lot of willful blindness, if you ask me.

But let's not just blame the Catholic Church. Willful blindness is also what caused thousands and thousands of mortgage bankers to sell mortgages to folks who couldn't afford them.

Willful blindness is also what white people have when they say that racism is a problem of the past.

My guess is that it won't take you too long to think of numerous cases of willful blindness in our country and in our world today. Let us not forget, however, that in some way or another, we *all* suffer from willful blindness.

Willful blindness also afflicted the people in today's story. The neighbors of blind have it. The Pharisees have it. Even the blind man's parents have it to a certain extent.

No one can believe that a man born blind (who is a sinner) could possibly be able to see again. It just didn't make any sense. It had to be a trick. It had to be a hoax. Something was terribly wrong with this picture. And even if in some way it could be true, which it really couldn't be, it certainly couldn't be from God, for everyone knows that God would never heal on the Sabbath.

The desire of the neighbors and the church leaders and even the parents to keep things running decently and in order prevents them from seeing Jesus, the Son of God, when he is right in front of their faces. They are willfully blind.

Peggy Payne, in her book *Revelation*, tells the story of a Presbyterian pastor in Chapel Hill who hears God speaking to him while he is outside firing up the grill from some shish kabobs. He hears God's voice "Like a hugely amplified PA system, blocks away, switched on for a moment by mistake." He doesn't know exactly what God says, but he knows he will never be the same again.

He tells his wife. She thinks he has had a stroke.

He tells his congregation. They give him paid leave and free trips to the psychiatrist.² They are willfully blind to that which they do not understand and cannot explain. Surely there must be a better explanation than "God." Surely this man must be sick or crazy.

Though I want to think I would have behaved differently toward this man, I also think that even those of us who believe in Jesus and know God is at work in our midst have our doubts when such stories crop up. Have you ever heard of someone who has been "healed" and immediately started thinking about the way the healing must have been a set-up, or a hoax? Have you ever doubted a friend or colleague when he or she said, "God told me to do this?"

² <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/05/15/books/when-god-interrupts-the-barbecue.html> (3-24-17).

Richard Lischer, retired professor of preaching at Duke Divinity School, tells the story of the day when one of the pillars of the congregation he served at the time stopped by his office before worship to tell him that he had been “born again.”

“You’ve been what?” Lischer asked.

“I visited my brother-in-law’s church, the Running River of Life Tabernacle, and I don’t know what it was, but something happened and I’m born again.”

“You can’t be born again,” Lischer said, “you’re a Lutheran. You are the chairman of the board of trustees.”

He was brimming with joy [writes Lischer], but I was sulking. Why? Because spiritual renewal is wonderful as long as it occurs within acceptable, usually mainline, channels and does not threaten my understanding of God.³

When Jesus heals the blind man, you see, he threatens the neighbor’s and family member’s understanding of the world and the blind man’s place in it. When Jesus heals the blind man *on the Sabbath*, he threatened the Pharisees understanding of God and Scripture—so much so that they are willfully blind to the fact that Jesus is from God.

It is easy to forget the tragedy in this story. Yes, the blind man is healed, but he is also questioned, cornered, doubted, and eventually kicked out of his own town for trying to help the Pharisees see what happened to him and who Jesus is. Yes, Jesus is the miracle worker, the divine Son of God, but he also is questioned, cornered, doubted and kicked out of town for sinning against God on the Sabbath.

The tragedy, in the end, is that the town is left alone in their willful blindness. In their desire to maintain religious order, they missed the miracle. They missed the Christ.

³ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=604> (3-24-17)

The story is not without hope, however. On the outskirts of town, walking away with Jesus, there is one who can truly see. “One thing I know,” the blind man tells his inquisitors, “I was blind and now I see. I see Jesus, and I know he is from God.”

And so, at the end of this story, at the end of this day, where will *we* be? Will we be left in the town, separated from God by our own willful blindness? Or will we be on the road with Jesus, our vision clear, and our hearts rejoicing?

I know where *I* want to be. May God grant us all clear vision to see God at work in our midst—today and always. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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