

John 9:1-41

It's possible for us to be victims of religion, and specifically the institution of religion (or the church). We can also be victims to our own religious ideals, especially when we have religious notions about God that seek to put God in a box of our own making. Most of us do this, at one time or another, and so we expect God to act and do as we think God ought to act and do. We then determine whether or not God has come up short.

When I was a seminary student I went through a series of faith crises, each one seemingly worse than the next, for a whole host of reasons, but one of the most outrageous things I did was spend several months during one of those crises, absolutely begging and pleading with God to show me a sign of God's existence. My faith had become so full of doubt that I felt the only way it could be remedied was if God showed me an actual real – life sign, a vision, a miracle, or some kind of proof that God existed.

I should have known better because as children, my little sister started having doubts about God's existence and she did the same thing. One night up in our bedroom, she and I were praying together and she said, "God, if you really exist, show me a sign of your existence, so that I can believe in you." We went to sleep and we were abruptly awoken by a doozie of an earthquake at about 4am. No one was hurt in that particular quake, but it was enough to really shake and scare us. As we were getting ready for school that morning I said to her, "You know, it kind of seems like that earthquake could have been God's answer to your prayer...the evidence you asked for God's existence." She responded glibly, "No it wasn't, that was just an earthquake." Now my point here isn't to argue whether that earthquake really was proof- I don't know, but as I pondered it, I wondered what proof would have convinced my sister, and I realized that there probably wasn't much in the way of proof that would have ultimately convinced her, short of an appearance by Jesus in all his glory, and I didn't think that was likely to happen. What it taught me is that asking for proof from God is a very tricky thing.

Despite this experience, as I said, I went through a season as a young adult of begging God for some proof during one of my faith crises. I had some

specific ideas in mind of course....I wanted a vision, a real honest to goodness mystical vision of God's presence. One night, at the peak of this crisis, I was alone in my car and began crying and asking God, yet again, to just show me something, something to prove to me God really existed. I remember saying, "If you're really there and you really love me, please show me!" I sat in silence for quite a while waiting in my dark car that night and nothing happened. I started to cry again. And then, suddenly, it started to rain, lightly at first, just tapping my windshield, but then it started coming down hard and poured heavy on the roof of my car. For a moment then, it felt like maybe God was there and was crying with me, and this rain was a sign. And then I thought "no," it's just rain...and it was going to rain whether or not I had made that prayer, it doesn't mean anything. Asking God for proof is a tricky thing.

When we look at the religious leaders as portrayed in our Gospel lesson from John today, we see a group of people who have very specific, religious views of God. God must fit into their box and their set of beliefs about God. Certainly they were not about to believe that Jesus was the Messiah without some kind of incontrovertible proof and some undeniable sign. I hope you caught the humor in this story because the multiple conversations the leaders have with the blind man who was healed are full of the ridiculous and of sarcasm. This blind man is miraculously healed and given his sight by Jesus when he responds to Jesus in faith, by washing his eyes in the pool of Siloam, but the religious leaders harass this man to no end. They harass him because this event doesn't fit in their "box" or their understanding of God. For one thing, the miracle happened on the Sabbath, and surely, they know, God wouldn't work or "heal" on the Sabbath, that was against religious law. Or maybe, they thought, this man wasn't really born blind, because how could a "sinner" (they assume Jesus is a sinner) perform such a healing without God's help? There must be some kind of mix up or this is just an outright lie. It can't be God. They even go so far as to get a hold of the man's parents to see if he truly was born blind, but when the parents tell them the truth, they can't accept their answer either. Nothing the man says can convince them, despite multiple conversations. And in fact, no answer was ever going to be good enough for them, because no sign can bring about faith in one who is spiritually blind and whose heart it closed. That's not how faith

works. Jesus was acting outside of their preconceived religious notions about God, and therefore this miracle, and Jesus himself, had to be rejected. And so the miracle wasn't a sign or proof, it was just a mix up or a hoax to their minds.

I wonder how often our preconceived notions about God get in the way of us having genuine faith. We too so often walk around blind like these religious leaders, but we don't know it. We are only able to "see" God and God's actions in the world the way we have predetermined God to be and to act.

I can't help but be reminded of the Homeless Jesus statue that was installed on the property of St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Davidson, North Carolina that created so much controversy a few years ago. The carving is of a homeless man that appears to be sleeping on a park bench covered in a blanket, face unseen. One only knows it is meant to be Jesus because there are nail holes in the bare feet and a sign from Matthew 25:40 next to it that reads: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." People got angry: someone placed a sign on the statue that read "Jesus shouldn't be remembered this way." Others expressed outrage in the local paper saying that the carving is objectionable because Jesus shouldn't be portrayed as a vagrant or as needy. It is interesting that it has sparked so much emotion in people, primarily religious people. It is easy to forget that Jesus was born in a stable and that he said in Luke 9: "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" because Jesus wandered far away from any home during much of his public ministry and was in fact, homeless in that sense.

It is an excellent reminder to us today that not only does Jesus identify with the poor and call us to serve the poor, but that we ought to look for Jesus in them too. As Mo. Teresa once said: "I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus." And certainly the homeless Jesus carving challenges our preconceived notions and ideas about what Jesus may or may not look like or how he might appear to us. Maybe we have all seen Jesus and not recognized him.

So...if God doesn't conform to our notions---and admittedly, often God does not, then we may be tempted to conclude that God either doesn't exist or that we are not seeing the work of God in our lives or the wider world. Maybe, we think, God is not to be trusted. Anything and everything can be given an alternative explanation when we start trying to put God into a box or seek this kind of proof from God. And certainly, whatever happens can always, always be chalked up to coincidence anyway. But more and more I wonder how many of our "coincidences" in life are really God-incidences.

I do not have all the answers, but Jesus has shown us that God is always on the side of healing and reconciliation, even if it doesn't come on our timeline or in the way we expected. But as long as we insist on God doing and acting in ways we demand and expect, we will remain blind, just as the Pharisees remained blind to Jesus...because the religious leaders are the real blind men in the story.

In Lent we are called to examine ourselves and to repent where needed, and it may be that we need to repent of putting God into a box of our own making as individuals, as a church, as a nation, and as a global religious community. In our blindness, we may be failing to see what God is showing us, things that are right in front of us. And a demand for proof is not the way. Perhaps instead, we can together simply pray, "Lord we are blind in so many ways; give us eyes to see you and to recognize your presence and your work and truth in your many unexpected ways."

Amen.