

Who Decides

John 9:35-41

On a Friday night in the fall of October 2009, I found myself driving home from one of our mountain cities. I had been away from home all week because after 4+ years one of my civil cases had reached the trial stage. The trial ended late Friday and all I wanted to do was get home.

The trial had not ended the way I or my clients desired and I felt hopeless. So I drove in complete silence heading toward Greensboro. As I drove, my anger seemed to grow over the injustice I had just been exposed to. Most people tend to think that those involved in court cases are only focused on one of two things, winning or losing. Those who focus only on winning or losing seem to forget about the losses quickly and revel in the victories for longer periods of time. Maybe this is one reason so many people continue to participate in such a system, and truth be told, there are days I wished I could think like that. Maybe that would have made life a little easier, but I'll never really know because caring only about winning or losing is not who I am.

Rarely, if ever, was my focus directed toward winning or losing a case, not because I didn't want to win because trust me, I did. My focus was then, and continues to be today, on the bigger picture of life and justice, and on this particular night, I silently promised myself that I would never voluntarily step foot in a courtroom again.

The thing is, each step of my journey into law offered me glimpses into the way people so easily disregard others and how easy it seems for some to believe it is within their right to determine what is true and what is false both in their life and the lives of others. I noticed something when this happened and I didn't like it. I noticed that one person's lived story vanished and was replaced by the story someone else projected onto them. It was as though their real lived story was a figment of their imagination, while the story projected onto them became the known story.

Each and every time I saw this happen, or even experienced it myself, I boiled inside because I believe there is something rather cruel about someone having their true lived story reduced to lies and fantasies, while the more dominant or louder person's projected fictitious story is substituted in its place. I never liked it. Not when I experienced it, but especially not when someone of a smaller stature in life, or minimal financial means, was subjected to it. This made me especially mad like I was that October night in 2009.

You see, I had spent over 4 years of my life telling my clients to believe in the system. Over and over I said things like once people, independent from your facts heard their story, they would believe them. And my clients decided to trust my words, and trust me. Each and every time someone called my clients liars or fakes they held tight to my words that we would find that group of independent people.

No part of the journey was easy, especially not for my clients and their families who they lost everything. There were times when it seemed their decision to finally step forward and tell their true lived story only brought more shame and ridicule and rejection. Yet they continued on...

even as friendships were destroyed, homes lost and businesses closed, they kept moving forward on this journey. Then sadly, tragically that Friday in October of 2009 my clients and their families heard for the last time that no one believed their story. When that independent group of people (the jury) came back with their decision in favor of the large wealthy corporate defendants, devastation doesn't even describe the feeling. Those wealthy corporate defendants who loudly and forcefully called my clients liars, without ever offering a separate version of events... who loudly and forcefully claimed everything my clients and their families said (under oath mind you) was fake. They were believed.

Maybe you can tell that I still haven't fully processed all of this and you want to know something, I am OK with my inability to process things like this quickly. The fact remains that no one has the right to tell me that I should not be bothered by knowing how easily one can dictate what is believed about someone else. I still feel mad when I recount this event, but then, as though fitting together perfectly, I am face to face with this particular scripture which compels me to dig a bit deeper into my own understanding.

This entire chapter of John's Gospel revolves around Jesus and the Blind Man because in everyone else's mind they are the only "sinners" in it. The man's sin, if you recall from earlier this year, was being born blind which in his day was a sure sign of God's judgment. Jesus' sin, in the eyes of others, was healing the man on the Sabbath. The interesting thing is, this chapter's conclusion is a complete reversal from its beginning. You see, the chapter began with the disciples assuming because someone was born blind either he or his parents must have been guilty of sin. Jesus, however, opposed that view, healed the man and then warded off the challenge from those who objected to him doing it on the sabbath. Now the chapter reaches its conclusion with the Pharisees, Jesus' accusers, claiming to see everything clearly, claiming only they can decide what others should believe, when in fact they can't. Jesus' comment on their belief though is quite telling, for he lets them know that while blindness itself is no indication of sin, claiming to see, claiming to decide someone else's truth, when you can't is. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, "[A]ccording to John, these are the people to watch out for, because they think they can see. Furthermore, they think they can see better than other people, and they are not shy about telling you that you are not really seeing what you think you see, or that what you are seeing is wrong."

Why people choose to impose themselves on others in this way is somewhat of a mystery to me because it strips everyone involved of the truth found in the lived experience. We see this in the story of the man born blind and if we started today's reading a little earlier in the chapter we would find that once he could see his own relatives weren't even sure who he was. Others who had seen him only as a blind man begging decided he was a different man altogether. Even his own parents, when summoned to the synagogue, couldn't bring themselves to fully believe in their son's story. Not to mention the Pharisees who put him on trial and ultimately decided to throw him out of the synagogue. How can it be that none of them said, "Alleluia," or "Thank God!" How in the world could this have happened to this man and none of them asked him what it was like to see for the first time, or whether the light hurt his eyes?

Shouldn't this have been a moment of joy and celebration for this man and his family and friends? Wouldn't you like to hear about the party being thrown in his honor? I know I would.

Instead, what we have here is a man put on trial by those in power, told his account of his own lived experience is false, and then thrown out... Discarded.

The hardline Pharisees stuck to their principles at the expense of the evidence right in front of them. They clung so tightly to those principles that justice and awe and wonder didn't even rise to the level of afterthought. Their system was one of division and exclusion. Their system could not allow an outsider to have a lived experience if they couldn't understand the experience. Their system didn't need to care for or respect the lived story of anyone they determined was a sinner. Theirs was a system of injustice.

Not only were the Pharisees wrong, they had also constructed a system within which they could never see that they were wrong. It is one thing to be genuinely mistaken, and to be open to new evidence, new arguments, new insights. It is another to create a closed world, like a sealed room, into which no light, no breeze, can enter. For the latter, they not only do the wrong thing, they adjust their vision of the moral universe so that they can label evil as good and good as evil, as though they get to decide this for everyone. Sadly, and without even realizing, once that has happened, those people have effectively struck a deal that may deprive them of joy, of mystery, of expansion. They have turned away from the beautiful and diverse ways of God and locked themselves into a way of thinking and living which systematically excludes God. This is one way of reducing God into a human construct, and make no mistake, when this is done it is not God.

The Pharisees believed they were right, and just like most of us changing beliefs is hard. The thing is, Jesus didn't appear to have a problem with that and as Barbara Brown Taylor says "... 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 and I don't believe that it is? That is the question the Pharisees forgot to ask." You see, they were so blinded by their ability to make decisions, for themselves and for everyone else, they couldn't see God at work. And Jesus called them on it.

The man on the other hand could now see and as a result he threw caution to the wind. So what if they threw him out of the synagogue? So what if the authorities, real and self-appointed, declared him to be born in sin? He had to follow where the truth leads, even if those who were supposed to know the truth were suppressing it. He had to follow even though it resulted in his being thrown out. The Good News is there is more to the story.

Remember, Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and went searching for him. He didn't go searching for Jesus. In fact, he couldn't have gone searching for Jesus because the only time he had been in his presence was when he was blind. He didn't have any idea what Jesus looked like. I don't know about you, but for me there is a certain beauty in knowing that Jesus went looking for him. When all others had rejected him. When all others decided his story was false, Jesus searched for him, and when he found him the man knew that he had finally found someone who would allow him to live his truth.

I find great hope in knowing that Jesus goes looking.
When harm is done to those less fortunate. Jesus goes looking.

When people, claiming they can see better than others, decide to reject someone's lived story because they can't understand it. Jesus goes looking.

When you summon the courage to speak your truth, like my clients did years ago and had their lives destroyed because of it. Jesus goes looking.

Knowing this helps me understand how much relationships built on love and togetherness should matter to followers of Christ. And you want to know something, if we are serious about following Christ, then maybe we should go looking too. Whether we go or not is on us. The decision is all ours.

So as we leave here today may we decide never to reject someone else just because their lived story is different than ours...

May we decide to open ourselves up to new evidence, new arguments, new insights, instead of creating a closed world where light cannot enter...

May we decide to follow where truth leads, even when those who are supposed to know the truth suppress it... And

May we decide to truly follow Jesus as he continues to go looking. The decision is all ours.
AMEN!