

The Man Born Blind

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

April 3, 2011

by

Deacon Brian Bromberger

Dr. Edgar Mitchell was a NASA astronaut who traveled into space on the Apollo 14 mission, becoming the sixth person to walk on the moon. But after he left NASA in the early 1970's, he began to study ESP & psychic phenomena. When Dr. Mitchell went to Little Rock for a conference, his mother drove several hundred miles from her home in Oklahoma to see him. For many years she had been suffering from slowly advancing glaucoma. Without her thick glasses she was legally blind. She was supposed to undergo surgery, but decided against it. Dr. Mitchell introduced his mother to Norbu Chen, one of the participants at the conference. He asked if she would be willing to let Norbu try to heal her. She was skeptical, but she humored her son. Apparently the two people, patient and healer, went into a trance together. When they both woke up, Norbu Chen told Mrs. Mitchell to assume she'd had major surgery, drink some grape juice, and go to bed. The next morning she burst into her son's motel room, shouting, "I can see!" Dr. Mitchell reports, "She proceeded to demonstrate her claim by reading from her Bible without her glasses. Then once again she said more quietly, 'I can see. Praise the Lord, I can see!' Dropping her glasses to the floor, she grounded the thick lenses into small pieces under the heel of her shoes." Mrs. Mitchell then drove back home without her glasses. "After going about her routine for a week with nearly perfect vision, unassisted by contact lenses or eyeglasses, my mother called one day to ask whether or not Norbu was a Christian. Though I didn't want to tell her, she was adamant. Reluctantly, I told her Norbu was in fact not a Christian, and the moment I did so the deep pain of regret was clear in her voice." "Her new sight was **not** the work of the Lord after all," she insisted. She was absolutely **certain** that Norbu, being of another faith, **must** be an instrument of evil. No matter what I said to her, no matter how I explained my own secular understanding of such phenomena, she would **not** be convinced." Hours later, the gift slipped away, her sight declined and even thicker new glasses were required for her to see at all.

In our Gospel passage we witness a physically blind man move from religious blindness to spiritual insight. Through his various encounters, his vision of who this Jesus is grows clearer and progressively higher as he faces more opposition, advancing from simply a man called Jesus, to a man from God, to a prophet, to the Son of Man, and finally to the divine Lord, the same spiritual journey our elect have been experiencing throughout their RCIA process. Everyone treats the blind man as if he were a nobody, without a voice, **certainly** not worth listening to. The disciples ignore him at first, then view him not as a person in need, but as a theological test case: **who's** to blame for causing **his** blindness. The neighbors never even noticed him until he was healed. His parents are too concerned about their **own** social and economic status in the community to defend their son. **No** one rejoices with him that his sight has been restored.

The religious authorities in his questioning shift their inquiry from **how** Jesus did the cure to **who** Jesus is. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus is seen as contradicting their tradition. They imply Jesus cannot be devout or do God's will because he is not a disciple of Moses, meaning a disciple on **their** terms. They are so tied to their religious institutionalism, bound by their dogma, and chained to their past beliefs, they are blind to the Light of the World, even when he stands **right** in their midst. They become idolatrous to their own views, feeling they know the will and mind of God, better than God. They spout out pious clichés and condescendingly claim a spiritual elitism that intentionally scapegoats and humiliates the blind man. When the blind man suggests their understanding of how God works, may need some **revision**, the authorities in a rage throw him out of the Temple shrieking, "How dare you lecture us," just as many in the Gospel of John's faith community in the late first century, were excommunicated from their synagogue because of their faith in Jesus. The blind man is caught in a vindictive religious world, which labels him a sinful outcast under God's judgment. The questions, the religious authorities ask Jesus and the blind man, are not doorways into dialogue, but act as fences designed to reinforce the boundaries of what these people already know, very similar to how Edgar Mitchell's mother responded to her own healing, unable **even** to entertain the possibility that God could use an unorthodox messenger to cure her. Both she and the Pharisees faced with a phenomenon beyond their own experience, scramble for an illusion of security and defensively ask questions that build a wall rather than open a door that would widen their vision and not let them remain blind to the power of God. This same behavior has a contemporary ring to it, I'm afraid, with regard to our own institutional church and how she sometimes deals with her dissenters and critics.

But how does the blind man respond to these attacks? He admits his lack of knowledge, but when threatened, clings to his **experience** of Jesus, the one thing of which he is sure: "Once I was blind, but **now** I see. His faith propels him to witness and keep telling the truth: I am who I am and I **know** what I know. He speaks out of his spiritual experience of being anointed by spit and dirt and touched by a welcoming, merciful grace and will not be stopped by intimidation. He learned he was not what others said he was. You are what **God** says you are. His faith is now taking **huge** risks, suffering a terrible price for his vision, all because he has chosen to look deeply and directly into the Light: "I was **there**, it happened to **me**. I have been **loved**." I remember as a child my father telling me a story about a man who was going to walk a tightrope across Niagara Falls, pushing a wheelbarrow in front of him. The crowd had gathered on the big day for his daring endeavor. The wind was blowing mightily. It whipped the rope back and forth. As the time for the walk grew close the crowd began calling out, "Don't **try** it! You'll **never** make it!" One man jumped up from the crowd and approached the tightrope walker. He said to the adventurer, "Go ahead! Make the walk. You can do it! I have **faith** in you." The tightrope walker replied, "**Great**, if you **believe** in me that **strongly**, get in the wheelbarrow and come along with me!" The blind man **is** that tightrope walker and **no** one wants to come along with **him**. Meanwhile the religious authorities are so sure of **their** version of Scripture and theology and stifled by **their** own limited, rigid interpretation, they discard any one whose experience and perception of God is different from theirs. They are the living embodiment of the lyric from singer Ray Steven's 1970's song, *Everything is Beautiful*: "There is none so blind, as one who will **not** see." Ironically, the only people Jesus expressed anger towards were those who

thought they were good and had all the **answers**. The people who **know** they can't see, are liberated and the people who think they **see** everything, see **nothing**. To be given sight, one **must** first believe that one is **blind**.

And it is **Jesus** who seeks out the blind man **after** he has been banished, to dialogue and continue to build a relationship with him. Doubted by his friends and neighbors, abandoned by his family, interrogated to the third degree, insulted, and disowned by his own society, the blind man doesn't play the victim, but is willing to receive new revelations from a tender, graceful God, and not cling to his own **set** ideas, laws, and spirituality. And once he understands **who** Jesus really **is**, his only response is to worship Jesus as Lord, out of boundless gratitude and joy, born of freedom. In spite of all his tribulation, the blind man always keeps his sight, **not** on the religious institution, but on **Jesus**, and who Jesus is for him **now**. When Jesus asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man," the deeper translation is Do you **rely** on me? It's not a question of intellectual belief, but about trust. Is the blind man willing to place himself and everything he holds dear in Jesus's hands? Can he live totally in Jesus, as Jesus now lives totally in him? Can we?

In the Gospel, Jesus challenges us to do the works of God, by which he means to **see** what Jesus would see if He were looking through **our** eyes and respond as **He** would respond. Jesus says, "Open your eyes and look beyond your own little world. Don't be like the religious leaders who refuse to see a **new** point of view, who think they **have** the truth and worry about defending it, but rather **you** put the truth of God's love into action in **your** life through compassion and care by healing and ministering to those who are hurting as I would do." We look at one another and can at times **fail** to observe God at work or to see each other as Jesus sees us. Instead we see a burden to be carried or a nuisance to be tolerated. As our Gospel reminds us, do we dare see an **opportunity** for God's glory to shine through when we least expect it? As Siloam means sent, we are **all** being sent, sometimes beyond the boundaries of what others may find acceptable, convenient, or comfortable. Sometimes we are sent beyond the limits of our **own** vision. We are ever mindful of learning **how** to see, which means we **must** keep revisiting the pool of Siloam to do the spiritual washing that will keep our eyes clear, so **we** can become a blinding light of God. There is a Zen Buddhist proverb: "Before enlightenment, chopping wood, carrying water. **After** enlightenment, chopping wood, carrying water." Being enlightened doesn't change the **world** around us, but rather changes our **way** of seeing the world. When we let the light of God open our eyes, we can more clearly see who we are, what we need to do, and where we need to be in our relationship with God, thus we can avoid contracting the disease, spiritual writer John Ortberg, refers to as SADD: Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder.

Tony Campolo, in his book *Carpe Diem*, tells a story from the life of a man whom many consider to be one of the truly original minds of the twentieth century, Buckminster Fuller, whose list of inventions would fill a good-sized book. Fuller explained that the source of his creativity was a painful misfortune that occurred during his childhood. He described how, as a small child, he lost his sight. He went to bed one night able to see and awoke the next morning **blind**. Medical experts were unable to explain the cause of his horrific and sudden blindness. There was **no** reason for it. It just happened. For several years young Fuller remained blind. Then, just as suddenly and as inexplicably as he had lost his sight, he recovered it, when one morning unexpectedly he woke up able to **see**

again. When he regained his sight, he claims that he saw everything entirely differently than he would have if his temporary blindness had not happened. He contended the status quo hold society had on his thinking had been broken by his blindness. Upon recapturing his sight, the world proved miraculously new and strangely wonderful to him. His amazing insight was the concept of the geodesic dome, constructing equal sided geometrical figures on the side of a sphere to create an extremely strong new form of architectural design. Buckminster or “Bucky” Fuller's insights have more recently inspired molecular chemists to see how carbon atoms arranged in a geodesic spherical design called “Bucky balls” can be used in nanotechnology to produce supercomputers faster than anything ever designed. Bucky claimed his excitement for life, imagination, and passion for discovery was intensified beyond anything that would have been possible had he **always** been able to see. So our gospel challenges us: **spiritually** we can be Edgar Mitchell's mother or Buckminster Fuller. The key seems to be, like the blind man, focusing, **less** on religious and social institutions, but **more** on Jesus, opening ourselves to receive him and having our understanding and insights transformed by him. The new eyes and the **new** way of seeing given to us by Jesus are world shattering and paradigm shifting. Our God is awesome and it's **our** perception which needs to change so as to take the limits off God; then God can do something amazing in our lives and catapult us spiritually to a higher level of blessing and service. God wants to **enlarge** our vision so we can start seeing people, obstacles, and events from God's perspective, not ours. My sisters and brothers, if Jesus can use spit and dust to do his will, he can **certainly** use us! As we climb into that rickety wheelbarrow of faith, are we willing to see God's goodness at work in **new**, perhaps unfamiliar ways? What could **you** be seeing this Lent, if like the man born blind, **you** would just allow Jesus to touch **your** eyes?