

Fourth Sunday in Lent

MAKING SENSE OF COMEDY

John 9:1-41

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Analysis by Marcus Felde

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. 4We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, 7saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" 9Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." 10But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 11He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." 12They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

13They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my

eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." 16Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. 17So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

18The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" 20His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." 22His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

24So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." 25He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" 28Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." 30The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32Never since the world began has it been heard that

anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." 34They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

35Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." 37Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." 38He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. 39Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." 40Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" 41Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

DIAGNOSIS: Making Sense of Tragedy

Tragedy makes sense. It makes more and more sense, as we get smarter and more informed. We know now why earthquakes and meltdowns happen, it's no mystery. "Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever does." Still, the religious in us tries to make our endings happier, generation by generation. And we all know that the main thing is for everybody to do the right thing. 'Cause when they don't, bad stuff happens. They call it tragedy, but we know it was somebody's fault. It always is! What goes around comes around. You can't tell me there aren't two sides to every story. And since we only call it tragedy when it is inexplicable, by making sense out of it all, by attaining the knowledge of all causes, there is less and less tragedy as we straighten out our world. Isn't that nice? If we understood everything, we'd never blame anyone. But meanwhile, people are

to blame. You've got to watch people.

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Confused about Everything and Everyone*

Did you ever see such a sight in your life, as these people who are casting about for a way to make sense out of the celebrity healer's latest offense: the healing of a man born blind? Their interrogations are a riot; their subjects get off the best lines, like "Ask him. He's of age." And "Do you also want to be his disciples?" It's rich with irony. Maybe they even have the wrong prisoner. He sure looks like the beggar! But, well. Appearances can be so deceiving!!! Initial diagnosis in this pericope is that the fruit of blindness is confusion, about practically everything.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *"We Know that This Man (Jesus) Is a Sinner"*

Here is an anti-creed if there ever was one. Because of which, set in their hearts, they totally miss the astonishing thing that Jesus did (as the man points out in v. 30). Their hearts are set against Jesus not on the evidence, but because he must not be the Messiah. Their hearts are set. Did I already say that? This is tragic irony, the sort that will lead people to ask for Barabbas, not Jesus, to be set free.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Blind "Fall in a Pit"*

Elsewhere Jesus mentioned that if the blind lead the blind they will fall in a pit. In a sense, the blindness is its own judgment. Enough. In v. 41 the gavel falls on the unbelievers when Jesus says, "Now that you say 'We see,' your sin remains." But the most important expression in this text of the judgment that falls on unbelievers (a.k.a., the really blind) is the evidence-all through the text-of great fear. As though, if they let Jesus go on like this, something really awful will happen.

They must prevent it! It's up to them! Otherwise, apocalypse!

Well, the judgment they are afraid of is being enacted upon them even as they judge.

PROGNOSIS: Making Sense of Comedy

Comedy does not make the same sort of natural sense that tragedy does, perhaps because of entropy? I don't know. Most comedies I read or watch rely on a deus ex hominibus, some wonderful hero who not only speaks French but plays the cello and can fashion an automatic rifle which shoots soft bullets out of a downspout and two boxes of quick oats. She will save the world, and fall in love with the sad lad who wasn't given a chance to live, after that terrible accident. We leave the theater with lumps in our throats, and wish: If only.... In my lifetime. So, comedy tends to be false, the happy endings an illusion. Who can blame the Pharisees of chapter 9 and Nicodemus in chapter 3 for trying to keep people from getting their hopes up. Verily, we know that God does not listen to sinners! Does he? Naah. No way. That would not make sense. Would it?

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *"Here's Mud in Your I"*

The beginning of the end of tragedy and the enshrinement of comedy as the language of faith is, well, just like the beginning of the world. Jesus spits and makes mud and "recreates" a sensient being, he makes a being sensient, just like at the very beginning. This metaphorical action stands in, proleptically, for the actual action: Jesus' turn to go down to the grave, being buried, made unalive, on Good Friday. For us. While we were yet blind.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *"Now I See"*

The erstwhile blind man believes almost without knowing he believes. I think he surprises himself. He didn't start out as

an evangelist, just as a man who was defending himself from the charge that he wasn't really himself. "I am the man (who used to sit and beg)." That is both a confession of "sin" and a confession of faith. Give me Jesus, he says, under pressure from the Pharisees. Over anything else, because, you know what, "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." This grows into a less cautious paean of praise: "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." Which, by the way, is what we heard from Nicodemus. Right? Who ultimately saw the light?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Denouement*

"Well, it was a difficult chapter in my life. But now I'm going to a technical college and I'm going to get a degree and get on with making things that help others. Who knows, I might end up being an optician. Or an optometrist. Or ophthphthalmogist, whatever they call it. I love seeing. I love seeing you! I love not having to beg, and believe me I never mind the least bit giving money to someone else who is begging. And if I don't have a coin for them, maybe I can sit by them and tell them about the best day of my life. 'You know, I used to be blind myself, and then....'"