John: Beloved, Embattled, and Estranged

John Bellaimey, St. John's Linden Hills Minneapolis, March 19, 2023

The Gospel of John was the last written of the four which made it into the Bible. What the other Gospels were is a tale for another day. John's the least biographical of the four, and the most theological. It's named for John though died before it was ready for publishing. Not John the Baptist, for whom our church is named, but John the Beloved Disciple, the Evangelist, the guy my parents had in mind when they named me.

My journalist wife points out that John goes on and on, that he ignores the proper chronology of events, and that John's portrayal of Jesus seems, um, *exaggerated.* All of which is fair. But by including the Gospel by the beloved friend of the beloved son of God, the early church gave us a front row seat for two dramas.

One, the foreground drama between Jesus and the Jewish authorities over what right he had to say and do what he did. This drama shows Jesus accept crucifixion by the Romans, with the approval of some of those Jewish authorities. The background drama was several generations later within the Jewish community, about whether the Jesus people were even Jewish anymore. The second drama resulted in an excommunication of thousands from their synagogues, and John's portrayal of Jesus' argumentative side. This background changes the way the foreground story is told. When you know about the eventual divorce between the Christians and Jews fifty or sixty years later, you understand better the choices John made in composing his Gospel.

Have you ever been estranged from your family, or a branch of it? Were you ever shunned? Cut off? Or did you separate yourself from people you once called beloved? I had a period of estrangement, a lonely, lost time in my twenties. I can say more in the sermon discussion time, but it was obvious to me that I could no longer be who I thought my family wanted me to be. I had moved to an Episcopal church, away from our strong Catholic way of life, given up my place in my father's business, and my mother disapproved of my girlfriend at the time. Though I lived in the same city, I didn't go to my folks' house for the better part of a year. Unlike the John they named me for, my belovedness was overshadowed by my sense of letting a lot of people down, and yet I felt I had no choice.

John's community was mostly Jewish, but lax about keeping kosher. They had begun to celebrate what we now call the eucharist on Sundays, rather than on the sabbath, which is Saturday. They worshiped

Jesus as God's Son, because they remembered Jesus describing himself that way. Like all Jews, they could no longer practice big parts of their religion in the Temple, because the Romans had demolished it, so like Jews everywhere, they were reinventing their spiritual connection with Adonai, the Lord.

John's community spoke Greek, and probably was based in what we now call Turkiye. They were surrounded by temples to gods like Zeus, Athena, and Dionysus. Back in Palestine, the gentile gods included Baal, Asherah, and Osiris.

Because John's Jesus people had just been banished from their synagogues, and because they had all just been banished from the traditions of serving God In Jerusalem, John's people felt anything but beloved. They clung to Jesus, their Light, their Vine, their Bread of Life. They recalled how he had had to fight again and again to be understood. And apparently failed with so many.

The blind man story happens in the midst of a long argument in the Temple. Like modern-day partisans, people couldn't even agree on facts, much less beliefs. To the Pharisees, Jesus' main rivals, the blind guy story had to be fake. Scene One:

- *It's not the same man. He just LOOKS like the blind beggar.*
- *This cannot be a miracle from God. Even God rests on the sabbath day!*
- *Let's go find his parents to find out how long he's been blind. Maybe he's been faking it.*

Scene Two:

- *OK, tell the real truth: was your son actually born blind?*
- *OK, and who did this to him today? If you believe this Son of God business, they'll excommunicate you!*

Scene Three:

- *Now listen, mister former-blind-man. Give God credit, not this phony Jesus. We know he is a sinner so he couldn't have done this. And don't talk back to us! You must be one of his disciples, eh? Well, we are Moses' disciples, and Moses actually talked to God.*
- *Still won't tell us where this Jesus ran off to? Why should we listen to you? You were blind. That means you are a big-time sinner. Or your parents were, and you are their punishment! Hell, you're all unclean. Sinful. Godless people!*
- *And don't tell us that he got God to heal you. Not on the Sabbath! He's a demon-worshiper, more likely!*

So then this poor guy, on what should have been the happiest day of his life, who refused to lie about Jesus and the mud and the sacred pool–they excommunicated him on the spot. His parents could keep

going to the synagogue, but he couldn't. Jesus, hearing the bad news, asked the man born blind if he believed in the Human One, which we often translate Son of Man. He realized Jesus was talking about himself, and he worshiped Jesus. Like a God.

Jesus turned to the onlookers and said he had been sent to undo blindness and to expose blindness of another kind. Being blind isn't some kind of punishment for sin. But denying this true healing made sinners of the deniers!

The deniers became Jesus' inquisitors. The formerly blind man was now estranged from his community, But estrangement is not necessarily sinful. Sometimes people cut off from one another with deep sadness. Perhaps both sides are blind to one another's reality. A couple realizes at long last they cannot pretend to love each other. A family is blinded by religion and won't accept their son being gay. Like the blind man embracing Jesus' truth, the gay son must be true to his reality. And sometimes, cutoff is necessary, like when an addict steals from everyone around her until she has no one left who trusts her. They aren't wrong to cut her off.

But as Mariann Budde, our former rector, used to say, cut-off relationships never heal.

You see some divorces bitterly festering for decades, others where one side is open to healing and the other side is maybe never going to be ready. And others where they become close again in a new way, even to the point of having Thanksgiving together. Sometimes the birth of a child or the anxiety of an illness knocks sense into people. And sometimes it just takes time to make you realize it's time to try to reconnect.

The peoples who would one day call themselves Christians and Jews were headed for divorce. That's the background drama in John's Gospel that I was talking about. On one side, to be Jewish was a culture, a history, a family tree, though dispersed across the globe. On the other side, Christianity was a new world religion: in Christ there was to be neither Jew nor Greek, female nor male, slave nor free. In other words, the Human One is for all of us. And he either was the Messiah or he wasn't. The foreground drama in John's Gospel casts the man born blind as a child in a custody battle. Was he eventually reconciled to his synagogue? Did his parents keep him at a distance, unhappily ever after?

I wish we knew more about him. In the foreground drama of John's Gospel, he's one of many called to the witness stand in the court where Jesus stands trial. The tension increases in the scenes to come, and

the church annually replays the whole business. In next week's episode, Jesus resurrects Lazarus, an action only the Messiah could pull off. And the week after that, we'll have Palm Sunday. Jay Hornbacher has a short play for us to recall Jesus' brief moment on stage as a conquering hero. The following week, we see Jesus humbling himself, not exalting himself, shrugging off the insults and bowing his head to accept his shameful defeat. But an unexpected victory comes with Easter, the message that God may not be in the business of smashing empires, but that in the long run, love is stronger than death, or hate, or fake truths. The last scene is on a beach, with the resurrected Jesus making breakfast for his friends.

What Lent and Easter teach us is that from defeat can come something great and mighty: God withstands being a loser. Love wins. Whatever failure, sickness, scandal, or outrage you can think of, whether you deserved it or not, God knows it and doesn't count it against you if you will simply keep at it. Persist. Hang in there. Lent and Easter also teach us something great and simple: after the resurrection, somebody still needs to make breakfast.

I don't think that the man born blind ended up having a fabulous life. Of course, it was amazing to be able to see, and I hope he was eventually allowed back from his religious banishment. I imagine he joined the Way of Love movement, and I imagine his parents did not. Did he move far away? Did he marry? Have children? Was his physical healing eventually matched by a reconciliation?

One of the reasons Jesus' story spread so fast and converted so many was that, like Socrates and other heroes of the Greek world, he was clearly a good man and would not be compromised. He accepted death bravely. Unlike Socrates, he overcame death and became somehow alive again, more than an inspiring memory, who convinced his followers that he was the Son of God, the Word of God, the Lamb of God. The Human One.

Some of them were threatened with death if they wouldn't deny him, and they became witnesses, like our poor man born blind, that Jesus' story was not too good to be true. It was true, and in the long run, for those of us who try to live in this story, it is very good.