

COMMENTARY:

## MISTAKEN IDENTITY, *OR*, WHEN BAD PEOPLE DO GOOD THINGS

[NOTE: This entire Commentary is based on a reflection of John 9:1-38. For context it will be extremely helpful to be familiar with this Common Lectionary gospel text printed at the end of this Commentary]

The man replied, "I don't know whether or not he is a sinner, but I know this: I used to be blind but now I see. John 9:25

You can offer to the righteous  
All the good that you have won.  
But down here among the unclean  
Your good work just comes undone.  
Your work just comes undone.

*The Road to Ensenada*  
Singer/songwriter, Lyle Lovett

There is within the compilation of writings we call our sacred scriptures the 'wisdom tradition' literature, consisting of proverbs, aphorisms, adages, and other sayings. "I didn't know that was from the Bible," you'll hear someone exclaim in astonishment. Jesus himself is said to have drawn from this tradition to spin some of his parables and give us some of his teachings.

Sometimes, such sayings can lose their original source and meaning, becoming life's little mottos and slogans to live by, in some other form; and sometimes reduced to the size of a bumper sticker.

Sometimes they become such culturally inculcated generalizations that it is presumed everyone thinks the same way, and it's all just taken for granted; so that they become equally unexamined or unquestioned.

Public assumptions about stereotypical beliefs found in popular religion does this all the time. Then it becomes something as ubiquitous as what I would call *conventional wisdom*. To see what I mean, take a look at a little conventional wisdom, and come up with your own examples as we go along. Here we go:

Good things happen to good people. When good things happen to good people, we say all is right with the world. Good people are good people, because they do good things. It's only *right* that they should enjoy the fruits of their *righteousness*. It stands to reason. Anyone can see that.

When bad things happen to good people, something's clearly wrong with the world. It is not right that the righteous should suffer; especially at the hands of bad people. They don't deserve it. They didn't do anything wrong, so we sometimes we call them the "innocents." Anyone can see that too, right?

And if bad things happen to good people, conventional wisdom conjures up something else, because folks want to believe there must be a reason for it. So we go looking for some explanation and come up with all those flimsy excuses, in order to make sense out of what is otherwise intolerable chaos; or worse, the creeping fear and suspicion some compassionate and all-powerful divine entity isn't really all that caring or powerful. Within the framework of conventional wisdom, I've personally never really heard an acceptable explanation or excuse.

Here's some more conventional wisdom:

When bad things happen to bad people, no one seems to get too upset. In fact, there is often a feeling of righteous vindication. They get what they deserve. If you do bad things, bad things should result. You reap what you sow, and like a bumper sticker I once read at a stoplight put it: "Vice is it's own reward."

But when *good* things happen to *bad* people, conventional wisdom says something's clearly wrong. It's not fair. And what's even more incomprehensible is the notion that bad people can do anything good. It just goes against the grain of conventional wisdom, and rubs everyone the wrong way.

*But when good things happen to bad people, conventional wisdom says something's clearly wrong. ... What's even more incomprehensible is the notion bad people can do anything good. It just goes against the grain and rubs everyone the wrong way.*

---

When Jesus heals a man blind from birth on the Sabbath he is not only violating Sabbath law, he's breaking with the conventional wisdom of his day. His own follower's question (asking Jesus who *obviously* sinned, this man or his parents, that this physically impaired – and therefore unclean – person is the way he is?) reflects such conventional wisdom.

Even decades later when John's gospel is composed, the storyteller may still be viewed as working within the confines of conventional wisdom, providing a reason for Jesus' action; that is, to presumably show God's glory at work in the One to whom the early community of believers would accord such divine powers and status.

What about that conventional wisdom reflected in the disciple's question and the gospel writer's profession of faith (if it hangs on the veracity of feats of magic)? What about the kind of conventional wisdom that still operates with seeming impunity to this day? Jesus the lawbreaker rejects it all.

So what do you do with a bad person who does good things? And, especially when good things happen to bad people as a result?

---

*About that ... kind of conventional wisdom that still operates with seeming impunity to this day? Jesus the lawbreaker rejects it all. So what do you do with a bad person who does good things? And, especially when good things happen to bad people as a result?*

After all, a good person isn't supposed to do bad things, whether anything good results from it or not. And, especially not for the benefit of others deemed inherently bad (and therefore, undeserving). Period.

That's all that seems to matter to everyone in this story; from the neighbors, to the parents, to the religious authorities. Everyone, that is, except the once-blind beggar/sinner.

The astonishing result of the blind man's cure is lost to the fuss and confusion that results from the orderly world of conventional wisdom and legalistic religion getting turned upside down; where those who thought they could see the way things are *supposed* to be, can't see anything at all.

The neighbors can't recognize a blind man they've known all their life. "Yeah, it's him!" say some. "Nah, can't be," say others. "It just looks like him."

His own parents? Instead of leaping for joy at the news their own child can now look back into their sad faces and see his mother and father for the first time, they all but disown him. For fear of being complicit in upsetting the apple cart, and going against Sabbath observance and the orderliness of accepted convention, they abandon their own flesh and blood, and only offer those pathetic excuses. "He's no longer a minor, he's on his own, ask him yourself," they say.

And the religious hierarchy? Those entrusted with the power and authority to preserve the blessings of the Sabbath completely lose sight of the most basic, emancipating principle of the religious life; that the Sabbath was made for the benefit of all God's people -- the lost and the redeemed --and not the other way around.

The religious professionals are portrayed as further impaired by their self-concern for blind power. In their prideful indignation ("You! Born as you are entirely in sin, you're trying to teach us?"), they expose their insatiable hunger to hoard forgiveness like it's a commodity; dispensing it

those deemed worthy, while withholding it from those who desperately need it the most.

Now, I'm sure we all regard Jesus as a good person, who obviously did good things. So we'd say he was only *perceived* as doing bad things; and only according to the screwed up conventional wisdom and religious hypocrisy of his day. We'd like to excuse ourselves and say, in Jesus' case, it was clearly a case of "mistaken identity." Anyone can see that, right?

But if that is so, why then do we still so readily accept such other conventional folly to this day, and call it wisdom?

---

*We all regard Jesus as a good person, who did good things. So we'd say he was only perceived as doing bad things ... it was clearly a case of "mistaken identity." Anyone can see that, right?*

*But if that is so, why then do we still so readily accept that other conventional folly to this day, and call it wisdom?*

---

As a miracle story, there's a lot of *conventional* religious thinking that seems to simply focus on believing in Jesus the miracle worker. It's a shortsighted view.

First, you can't explain a miracle without explaining it away. So don't get hung up on the miraculous feat, but rather the result. Reducing the story to a question of believing or not believing in something seen by some eyewitnesses as "miraculous" is an unnecessary distraction.

The miraculous healing Jesus performs with his magic potion of spit and mud is a dramatic device meant to point us to the more important place in the story, and a different way of seeing things:

Contrary to conventional wisdom, there's another, different kind of wisdom. It is a kind of wisdom that helps us see there is little difference between those who presume to see, and those who are blind; between those who are good, and still do bad things, and those who are deemed to be bad,

or unclean, or unworthy; but who nonetheless have the capacity – by what we call the Grace of God – to turn their lives around and do good, even amazing, things.

Just ask yourself if you've ever known a *bad* Christian. You shouldn't have to look too far. Then ask yourself if you've ever known just a *saint of a person*, who may have not only had a checkered past, but also didn't appear to have a religious bone in their body. If you're lucky enough to have had someone like that in your life, it could make a real believer out of you. Just ask the man at the end of this little gospel story.

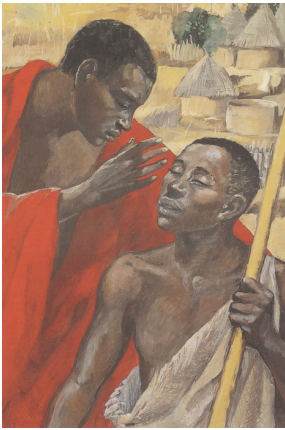
Borrowing some lines from one of crossover country singer/songwriter Lyle Lovett's tunes, you might say Jesus "offered to the righteous all the good that he had won." But when he got "down there among the unclean" – and he did it all the time – "all his good just came undone." But that's the way it goes with conventional wisdom.

Jesus rejects the conventional thinking of his day that passes for wisdom, and such conventional wisdom rejects Jesus; along with the notion that bad people can do good things. It is something that is as pervasive now, as it was in Jesus' day. And it is likely as pervasive in some ecclesiastical hierarchies, as it was among those blind and begrudging Pharisees. The blind lead the blind, and there's little wisdom to be found in it.

An old friend and colleague once taught me a baptismal blessing I've since used for decades, for those who would presume to set out upon that alternative path of wisdom Jesus walks. It offers various blessings for the candidate's ears, lips, hands, feet, and – in this case – the eyes.

"I bless your eyes," it goes. "I bless your eyes, that you may see the face of Christ in all people."

I take that to mean *all* people. And I take such a blessing to be the greater miracle.



"Jesus cures the man born blind"

JESUS MAFA is a response to the New Testament readings from the Lectionary by a Christian community in Cameroon, Africa. Each of the readings were selected and adapted to dramatic interpretation by the community members. Photographs of their interpretations were made, and these were then transcribed to paintings.

Following the Common Lectionary, the **Gospel Reading** from the Christian scriptures, John 9:1-38

*This story follows the dispute between Jesus and the religious authorities over the woman caught in adultery, and who can pronounce her sin forgiven. Now we have another elongated and highly stylized portrayal of Jesus, as developed in the fourth canonical gospel. Rich with metaphor about sight and blindness, the healing miracle is subordinated to institutional squabbling over the propriety of who deserves to be healed, and who should be "seen" as having the authority to perform such acts of kindness.*

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The 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?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He 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." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. [Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then 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." Some 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. So 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." The 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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; His 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. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So 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." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He 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?"] Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.