

April 23, 2011
4th Sunday of Lent
John 9:1 – 41
I'll see it when I believe it

We've all said it about one thing or another. "I'll believe it when I see it." We say that about things we doubt will happen. Your kids promise to do their homework Friday after school instead of waiting until Sunday night. Your student tells you that she'll have her paper done tomorrow. The electrician says he'll be at your house first thing in the morning. The mechanic guarantees that your car will be done by 5. Sure. You'll believe it when you see it.

Jesus and John were each eager to show the people of their day what it meant to believe. What it looked like, what it felt like. How seeing the world would be different when they believed. Nicodemus tried to understand, but slipped back into the darkness of unbelief. The Samaritan woman at the well believed pretty quickly and her life was changed. She rushed back to town to tell others so they, too, might believe. For her, and today's blind man, their lives were totally changed when Jesus came into their lives. When they believed, then they could see!

But wait, the blind man's conversion wasn't from unbelief to belief. He grew up religious. His parents were clearly faithful to the synagogue. His blindness is a symbol for the lifelessness Jesus felt overshadowed most of his religion. Jesus was trying to bring his brothers and sisters, and anyone else who would listen, like the Samaritan woman, out of darkness. And even though these conversion stories sound instantaneous to us, in each of them, it's clearly important to Jesus and the gospel writer to show that they happened in several steps: a realization that Jesus was different, Jesus reinterpreting a part of Judaism (sin doesn't cause blindness, foreigners are welcome to believe), realizing he is a prophet, realizing that they were different after meeting him, and finally calling him Messiah and going to tell others.

Any of that sound familiar? Not that instantaneous conversions can't happen, but for most of us, learning and growth is a good thing and can change our lives. And it takes work. And we do become different people.

Johnny Lee Clary was ordained last year into ministry with the Church of God in Christ. If you don't know the Church of God in Christ, it's a 6 million member Black Pentecostal denomination. What's unique about Johnny Lee Clary's ordination is that he's white. And he used to be the

Grand Dragon of the KKK in Oklahoma, and then the imperial wizard of the white knights of the kkk. He tells a great story of the beginning of his coming out of darkness into light. In 1979 he was to debate the Rev. Wade Watts, president of the Oklahoma NAACP. He said he expected to meet a man with a huge afro, a dashiki with bones hanging off it, carrying a boom box playing the theme from "Shaft," wearing a button that said "Kill All Rednecks," and carrying a knife. That's what he'd been told African Americans were like. He grew up in an overtly racist home, had a rough childhood, was left with his older sister, and joined the Klan as a teenager because they promised to be family to him. Back to that 1979 debate. Instead of his image of a Black man, in strode a smiling man in a nice suit, carrying a Bible, hand outstretched, saying, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Cary. I love you and Jesus loves you." Johnny was so flabbergasted, and probably nervous, that he shook Rev. Watts hand, breaking a Klan rule about not touching non-whites. He recoiled his hand in disgust, looking at it, and Rev. Watts said, "Oh, don't worry, Johnny, it doesn't come off." In the years to follow, Johnny and his Klan posse harassed Rev. Watts mercilessly. They dumped garbage on his front lawn. Rev. Watts came outside and said, "Fellows, it's months from Halloween. I'm not ready for trick or treaters. Sorry I don't have anything for you. Please come back in October." They burned a cross in front of his house, and Rev. Watts came out and said he wished he had hot dogs and marshmallows to give them. Frustrated that his intimidation wasn't working, Johnny disguised his voice and called Rev. Watts, "Boy, we're coming to get you. We won't stop." Rev. Watts said, "Hi Johnny. Oh I'm honored a man such as yourself has taken the time to call me. Let's have a word of prayer. 'O Lord, Johnny's really a good boy. Forgive him for acting so stupid.'" Johnny hung up on Rev. Watts mid prayer. Then they set fire to his church, but it was caught before it did much damage. Still frustrated, they continued to follow Rev. Watts. One night while eating in a restaurant, about 30 Klansmen came in surrounded his table, and Johnny said, "You'd better leave town, cuz we're about to do to you, what you're about to do to that chicken on your plate." Rev. Watts looked at them all, picked up a piece of chicken, and kissed it. The whole restaurant broke out laughing.

Johnny Lee Clary's conversion from the darkness of racial hate to the light of believing like Jesus did, that all people are God's creation, his conversion took a while. There was about 20 years between his harassment of Rev. Watts and his ordination in the Church of God in Christ. His ministry now is going all over the country and the world preaching the gospel of racial

equality and understanding. And it needs to be said that Rev. Watts was an amazing example of the light of Christ refusing to be overshadowed by hate. What courage and spirit he had!

Just like the previous 2 weeks' stories from John, this story is woven full of the symbolism of darkness and light, blindness and sight. The man born blind moves from living in literal darkness, meeting Jesus, to seeing the light of day and spiritually seeing the light – knowing who Jesus was. Spiritually, he went from “I’ll believe it when I see it” to “I’ll see it when I believe.” The truly blind characters in the story are the Pharisees. They don’t see at all. They deny the man’s healing, instead they accuse Jesus of sinning by kneading clay and spit on the Sabbath. The man’s faithful Jewish parents don’t deny the healing, but don’t “believe” either. They represent the fence-sitters, the educable ones. Only the blind man, and of course, Jesus, truly “see.”

Has your life been changed by Jesus, like the blind man’s was? Can you say with the enthusiasm of the blind man did, that Jesus is the Christ? Are we more likely to say, “I’ll believe it when I see it” or “I’ll see it when I believe.”? Life is so much more fun and meaningful if our believing directs our seeing.

Jesus asked the healed man in this morning’s story, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” The man answered, “And who is he? Tell me, so that I may believe.” Jesus said, “You have seen him and the one speaking to you is he.” The man immediately responded, “Lord, I believe.” I know there are some amazing healing stories, physical and spiritual, in this congregation. Even for those of us who haven’t had such dramatic encounters with the living Christ, we have seen him, and we can answer, “I believe.”

Did you see the PBS special some years ago about the author of our closing hymn, “Amazing Grace?” John Newton was quite the cad in his 18th century world. He reveled in shocking his sailing companions with his foul language and outrageous behavior. Johnny Lee Clary might have been a great-great grandson of John Newton, their lives have so much in common. I had thought Newton’s conversion from the darkness of being a slave trader was instantaneous. It wasn’t. He went back and forth between his awful lifestyle and faithful living several times. It was that one storm that made his belief in Jesus finally stick. And become a minister and write this beloved hymn.

Did you notice that the blind man didn’t ask to see? He had adjusted well to his world. If Jesus hadn’t taken the initiative, he’d still be in the dark. What darkness have you gotten used to?

What fear is your companion? What long held grudge has a nest in your heart? What dream of who God knows you can be, have you not given voice to? What lack of respect of you gotten accustomed to tolerating? Or giving? Today's the day to change all that. To begin to move from darkness to light. Or continue a journey you've been working hard to accomplish. May the living Christ be real to each of us today and every day. So real that he changes the way we see the world. That we go from blindness to sight, from darkness to light.