Blindness on the Road

I had a rough winter. Snow, ice, polar vortexes… but the worst part was the roads! How do you people ever get anywhere in the winter? I remember one Sunday, on the way to church, I noticed my windshield getting really dirty from a combination of snow, dirt, and salt on the roads. So, like usual, I pulled on my wipers to wash the windows. And the blades ran, but no liquid came out. MY WASHER FLUID WAS FROZEN. So, really, what I did was make my windows twice as dirty while more evenly spreading out the grime. The result of this was about 10 of the most horrifying seconds of my life. Driving blind around the curve between Millennium Park and Navy Pier on Lakeshore Drive. We can laugh at my terrible winter driving, but being blind on the road is a completely disarming human experience. Even life-threatening.

Of course, this is a much different type of blindness than Cleopas and friend experience on the road to Emmaus. Their eyes were kept from recognizing the resurrected Jesus on that road, but it’s not like their life was in danger. And what ensues appears to a sort of practical joke on Jesus’ part. A comedy of mistaken identities almost Shakespearean in its irony. The blindness is innocent, humorous even. Not dangerous. Definitely not life threatening.

But this is not Luke’s first story involving blindness and a road. A few chapters earlier, Jesus tells a parable about a man who is attacked on the road. A priest and a Levite pass by blindly, until a Samaritan helps the man out. A little later, Jesus heals a blind beggar. Sitting where? by the roadside. Blindness and roads are intimately connected in the gospel narrative. And as I found out, the road is a dangerous place to be blind.

Which brings me to my second winter driving experience. It was Valentine’s weekend and my fiancé was visiting. We got in the car all dressed up to go to a nice valentines dinner, but when my foot pressed down on the gas, my car didn’t move. I kept pushing down and my tires were spinning away, but were unable to grab traction in the slush. I twisted the wheel. I reversed and jumped forward—all the things my cold weather-inclined friends have instructed. Still nothing. About this time, a car pulled up with rap music blaring and two young, kinda shabby looking guys stepped out of the car. I was initially confused and startled by these men approaching my car. Surely THEY were not intending to help me. But then one of them yelled at me, “push it.” I turned over the wheel to Sara and leapt from the front seat. Together, with them shouting directions, the two men and I freed my car from the slush. And I was back on the road.

Whether it’s a Samaritan, a blind beggar, or two young strangers digging out my car, one thing becomes clear within these stories: The road is a place where you encounter the other. On the road to Emmaus, Cleopas scoffs, “Are you the only STRANGER in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” Hear that? Stranger. Other. And he was talking to JESUS! And in this exchange, the nature of the disciples’ blindness comes into stark view. If the resurrected Jesus is unable to be seen, the blindness of the road is devastatingly harmful. Even life-threatening.

When I later told people about my incidents on Lake Shore Drive and being stuck in the slush, they were a bit stunned. “Doesn’t your washer fluid work for 20 below? Don’t you keep a shovel in your car? Or Sand? Or Cat Litter?” Ummm No! Why would I do that? Why would I know what temperature my washer fluid can withstand? In South Carolina, we don’t have cold weather driving procedures. I mean.. Cat litter?! Seriously?! As I learned, my blindness on the road that day was partly an accumulation of dirt and salt and snow. But it was also the blindness of being raised in a warm climate. Of never asking the question of “What temperature is my washer fluid rated to?” My own blindness was failing to recognize a situation I never had to think about before.
This Lent, Holy Trinity read a book about the damaging effects of white privilege. In its simplest terms, white privilege is blindness. Blindness to others on the road. Blindness to powers that impact every day of our lives. Blindness to systems of oppression. Author Harlon Dalton writes, “One mark of oppression was that black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility.” This mantle of invisibility, when phrased in terms of the privileged might be said another way, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

And what about our blindness? I’ve thought about my own blindness as those two young men approached my car. My inability to see Christ on the road. Say we were walking down Addison/Dearborn street after church and the resurrected Jesus appeared to us as a Packers fan? or someone of another race? or a recently released felon? Or an evangelical Christian? Or a Republican? Would we be able to put aside those things that blind us and recognize the resurrected Christ on the road?

Though our roads may still include blindness, the story of Emmaus does not end on the road. As the two disciples and one stranger sit down to a meal, the stranger breaks bread. “And their eyes were opened. And they recognized him.” In a simple act of hospitality, community, and feeding, eyes are opened. Vision is restored. Life is gained.

And this resurrected Jesus was recognized in a very bodily way. He walked alongside his disciples. He spoke with them. Asked questions. Broke bread and blessed it. And now today, at Holy Trinity, we can recognize the resurrected body of Jesus in our midst. As we gather together. As we hear words of life. As Bread is broken, blessed, and eaten at this table. Today, God’s grace, embodied in the risen Jesus walks us to restore vision in our bodies.

The immediate reaction of Cleopas and friend to their eyes being opened was another bodily reaction: heart burn. “Were not our hearts burning within us?” they ask. It seems that with open eyes comes burning hearts. Burning with the presence of resurrection. Burning with justice, hope, and love of the stranger on the road.

It’s no longer winter in Chicago. The coming of Easter has restored vision both in our bodies and also, on our roads. So whatever road we’re on, may our hearts burn within us and our eyes be opened.