

Isaiah 42:10-12, 16; John 9:35-39
Feast Day of Fanny Crosby

Seeing God Face to Face

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Today we celebrate the feast day of Fanny Crosby. Born in 1820, Crosby was one of the most prolific – if not *the* most prolific – hymn writers in the history of Christianity. She wrote the texts for over *eight thousand* gospel hymns and religious poems in her lifetime. Eight thousand pieces. That works out to something like writing three pieces every week – week in and week out – for fifty years. I guess she didn't believe in course extension petitions!

Not only that, but Crosby had two hundred or so pseudonyms (that is, different pen names she wrote under). This was because her publishers did not want to have too many hymns attributed to a single person in their hymnals!

Now, most lyricists have the luxury of writing their words first and *then* the composer sets the music to the lyrics. Not Crosby. She had a gift for taking any melody – no matter how complex – and creating religious lyrics to fit the music, many times on the fly. As you can imagine, composers loved her! Crosby was able to do this because, as a child, she had learned by heart large portions of the Bible, from the Pentateuch to the Psalms to the Gospels.

What makes this all the more amazing is that Crosby was blinded as an infant – at six weeks of age – by an imposter who pretended to be a doctor. In the nineteenth century, as in biblical times (and even sometimes today), blind people were extremely limited by society in terms of what they could do. If they were lucky, they were sent to residential schools and taught the “blind trades,” which consisted of chair caning, basket weaving, and rug weaving.

Fortunately, people identified and encouraged Crosby's talent for poetry from an early age. For example, at the tender age of eight, she wrote this poem about her blindness:

“Oh, what a happy soul I am,
Although I cannot see!
I am resolved that in this world
Contented I will be.

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How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't,
To weep and sigh because I'm blind
I cannot, and I won't!"

Today's scripture readings contain a lot of references to blindness, both physical and spiritual. The reading from Isaiah refers to God guiding the blind and "turn[ing] the darkness before them into light." And today's gospel passage from John is taken from the story of Jesus curing the person who was born blind. In that story, as you may recall, the religious leaders of the day had blamed the person's visual impairment on his sins or the sins of his parents. Even after Jesus restored the person's sight, the religious leaders – who themselves are portrayed as being spiritually blind – refuse to listen to the testimony of the formerly blind person and drives him from their midst. Only Jesus takes the time to interact with him.

I must confess – especially since we are in a seminary context – that I often find these miracle cure passages difficult to preach on. First, as an openly-gay man, I am wary of "cure" language, particularly in light of how often the religious right and ex-gay movement often claim that LGBT people can be cured of our sexual orientations or gender identities if we simply turn to Jesus. Second, I wonder about all the people who hear these stories and are *not* cured of whatever they have been praying to God about, whether it's a physical or mental disability or terminal illness. What does that say about God or their own faith? Third, I struggle with how best to preach about disabilities sensitively and authentically as someone who is a temporarily able-bodied person and who also seeks to be an ally in the disability rights movement.

I recently came across a wonderful reflection on the ninth chapter of John – the larger context of today's gospel reading – by Dr. Katherine Schneider, a Christian layperson and retired professor of psychology from the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Schneider herself is blind from birth. She writes with exasperation – and yet with a good sense of humor – that most of the sermons she's heard on this passage contain the following five clichéd elements:

- One. The minister's knowledge of amazing blind people who climbed Mount Everest or who were cheerful all the time.
- Two. A comment on how awful it would be to be blind.
- Three. Noting that Jesus' healing of the blind man was miraculous.
- Four. Pointing out that the Pharisees were blind not to recognize Jesus for who he was.
- Five. A prayer that we never act blind (that is, insensitively) to the world around us.

In contrast to these clichéd sermons, Schneider proposes a liberation theology of disability to read this gospel passage. For her, what's most important about this story is not the physical healing of the blind man. Rather, what's most important is the fact that Jesus took the time to enter into an *authentic relationship* with the blind man – that is, to ask him questions, to listen to him, to converse with him – while the others around him simply ignored him or tried to push him away.

Schneider challenges those of us who are temporarily able-bodied to reflect on what we've done to enter into authentic relationships with disabled people in our worship communities. Not just to make things accessible so that people can show up, but to allow for the full participation of people with disabilities. Schneider suggests some questions that we should ask ourselves:

- Do we “see” one out of seven people with visible disabilities at our places of worship? If not, why not? What can we do to change that?
- Imagine not just participating in – but leading – worship with a disability such as blindness. What would we need to do differently or change?
- Do we refrain from using the word “blind” to mean ignorant or out-of-control, like “blind rage”?
- Do we work affirmatively for civil rights for and with people with disabilities?
- Do we make an effort to befriend people who happen to have disabilities?

For me, the true significance of Fanny Crosby's hymns – which we are singing today – is not so much her exceptionalism, but rather the fact that these hymns tell us something about her deeply authentic relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

I recognize that some of us may find the genre of the nineteenth century gospel hymn problematic, especially with its blood theology and atonement language. However, I believe that such evangelical hymns are still valuable, even at a place like EDS. This is because such hymns are a lens through which we can experience the kind of *personal relationship* that Crosby had with Jesus – as opposed to all the people around her who might have underestimated, ignored, or rejected her simply because of her disability.

Although Crosby wrote over eight thousand hymns and poems, there was one text that she never published. She called it her “soul poem,” because whenever she felt troubled she would recite it, and it would “bring comfort” to her heart. It reads:

“Someday the silver cord will break,
and I no more as now shall sing;
but O the joy when I shall wake
within the palace of the King!

And I shall see Him face to face,
and tell the story—saved by grace!”

This “soul poem” looks to the eschatological horizon where Crosby expected to see her savior “face to face” one day. Crosby died at the age of 94, and she wrote hymns up until the very end. Her last lyrics were “You will reach the river brink, some sweet day, bye and bye.”

May we all share in Fanny Crosby’s yearning to see God “face to face.” May we all learn from Crosby’s example of *embracing* the gifts that God has blessed us with, of *entering* into a deeply authentic relationship with Christ Jesus, and of *following* the Holy Spirit, no matter where that may lead us.

+Amen.