

For those of us who are awaiting the opportunity to begin tending our gardens, the lingering snow piles and recurring waves of snow are probably stretching our patience. For in our mind’s eye we may already be resonating with words of a song written by Paul Stookey called “Inch by Inch”: *“Inch by inch, row by row, gonna make this garden grow. All I need is a rake and a hoe and a piece of fertile ground. Inch by inch, row by row, let God bless these seeds I sow; let God warm them from below ‘till the rain come tumbling down.”*

In reality, however, none of us is able to MAKE a garden grow. While we may understand that seeds need good soil, proper light, the right amount of moisture, cultivation and protection--the bottom line is that we still cannot explain what causes a seed to actually start to grow. Ultimately, we have to say it’s a God-thing. It’s God’s energy, God’s touch that starts the actual process. It is then that this seed--this tiny piece of creation--becomes a mighty thing--for when planted in the earth, it is able to push up through the soil, even through snow, grow up out of rock crevices and grow in other places we wouldn’t expect, to become a life form multiple times its original size.

So how does this relate to today’s Gospel lesson? While today’s lesson has many characters and moves from scene to scene, a thread that runs the length of this Scripture is the story of one man’s growth in faith—faith which begins as a seed, and blossoms into a confession of faith in Jesus and worship of him, in spite of challenges and obstacles.

In the first scene, Jesus and his disciples become aware of this man who had been born blind, and immediately the disciples want to know why. **“Someone must have sinned...,”** they say. **“Was it the man or his parents?”** The disciples are still engaging the Old Testament perspective of believing that when bad things happened to people it was because they had done wrong. But Jesus corrects this perspective right away saying that the man’s blindness is not about sin or punishment, or anything that he or his parents did. **“Rather,”** Jesus says, **“this is about God. It’s about showing what God is doing among us.”**

Jesus then composes a mixture of mud and saliva, which in those days was thought to have healing properties, and applies it to the blind man’s eyes. At Jesus’ direction the man goes to wash in a pool of water, and he comes back able to see. But immediately following this miracle, the man’s neighbors ask: **“Is this the one who used to sit and beg?”** Some said *“Yes.”* Others said: *“No.”* The neighbors’ doubts obstruct their ability to believe what had just happened, even though the man clearly identifies himself as the one who was blind, but now sees, and names his healer as *the man called Jesus.*

Then the Pharisees step into the scene. They start questioning the man in order to detect if the Sabbath law--which forbid any work on the Sabbath--has been violated. But after the man tells his story, the Pharisees become divided, some saying: **“How can the one who performed this healing be from God, if he doesn’t follow the Sabbath rules—for he has broken the law by doing work on the Sabbath!”** Yet others said: **“No mere sinful man could do such a miracle.”** This time, when the Pharisees ask the formerly blind man his opinion of his healer, he now confidently names Jesus as a prophet.

Then the man’s parents are called into this investigation by the religious leaders but they don’t want to say much, because they know that if they say anything that sounds like they believe a miracle has happened, which could have been done by the Messiah, they would get kicked out of the synagogue.

Again, the Jewish religious leaders come back to the sighted man. Their questioning seeming to border on harassment, as they ask him the same things again, and

put down the one who had healed him. But the man states again that “though I was blind, now I see.” And as he tries to make sense out of their repeated inquiries, he asks honest questions to understand their motives: **“Why do you want to hear (the story of my healing) again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”** But this totally enrages the religious leaders (who generally opposed Jesus) and they blast the man with their words: **“We follow the law of Moses, for we know that God has spoken through him, but as for the one whom you claim has healed you, we have no credible proof of who he is.”** But the man continues to witness, wondering why the religious leaders don’t know the one who healed him. Ultimately he makes a bold statement, saying: **“How can a man who opened the eyes of one born blind--something unheard of to this day—how can he not be from God, because only someone from God could do that.”** But the religious leaders angrily reply: **“You’re just a sinner, and you dare to teach us!”** And they kick him out of the temple.

But when Jesus finds out what had happened, he goes to this man, reveals his identity to him and confirms his faith. And the man who had been healed of his blindness witnesses to his faith in Jesus as the Son of Man and worships him.

Here in this biblical account, we see faith which begins as a seed, and blossoms into a confession of faith in Jesus and worship of him, in spite of challenges and obstacles: the disciples’ misconceptions, the neighbors’ doubt, the Pharisees’ legalism and judgmental attitudes, his parents’ fear, and the rejection and ousting he experienced when he confessed his belief that his healer was from God. And the question is: How did this man’s faith not only survive, but continue to grow in the midst of all of this?

Ultimately, we have to say it’s a God-thing. It’s God’s energy that sparked the beginning of faith within this man at his healing, but this man was also open and receptive. There was nothing in the way between him and the Lord, so the seed that the Lord planted in his heart at his healing had the chance to come to life and to continue to develop and grow to the point where the man could not help but continue to witness to the one who had given him sight, throughout all of the challenges and obstacles he faced.

Is there anything that hinders us from having a close, dynamic relationship with God? Are there misconceptions, doubts, legalisms, fears, or clutter of some kind that get in the way? For the closer we are to God, the greater strength we will have for living every day. For when we turn our eyes upon Jesus..., *the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.* Then everything will come into its proper focus. We will see what’s really important--our relationship with God. Then, our problems will look smaller, our fears will shrink, and our joy and confidence will grow.

May you grow closer to the Lord every day. And may your belief and trust in him increase, and your worship of him spring freely from your heart. Amen.