

Lent 4A March 2, 2008
Leesburg Presbyterian Church
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(I Samuel 16: 1-12)
John 9

God of mercy, help us to reach out for your healing touch. Open our eyes to the ways you are at work in the world, enabling us to witness to your truth. Shine through us so that our neighbors will see the light of the world and learn to walk in your love. Amen.

During the season of Lent this year we have been looking at some of the stories about Jesus that are unique to John's gospel. Each of the gospels will tell us a story about Jesus restoring sight to someone—something that never happens in the Old Testament. In the Hebrew Scriptures prophets declare that God has the power to restore sight to the blind, and that in the coming "Day of the Lord," that will happen, but while there are healing stories attributed to various prophets, no one ever restores sight to the blind. The details here make it unclear whether the story that we are reading this morning is connected to any of those other gospel accounts.

This is very typical of the form of the fourth gospel. We have already heard the very spare telling of the miracle itself—John would call it a "sign"—and the first conversation about it. But where we usually have Jesus commenting on the meaning, here Jesus actually disappears from the text while others have an increasingly vehement dispute about what happened.

This gospel is somewhat later than the other three and constructed in a very different way. It comes from a time that is sometimes called, "The Great Divorce," a time when it was becoming impossible for followers of Jesus to remain within the Jewish communities in the cities of the Diaspora. Whether they stomped out of the synagogues in protest or were pushed out by those who wouldn't accept Jesus remains very speculative. But what is clear here is that this writer reflects that anger with those stubborn "Jews," which is why this gospel often sounds so anti-Semitic. From time to time we can see the situation of John's first century community sort of leaking into the stories of Jesus. The phrase that we will hear in this dispute about being "put out of the synagogue," makes no sense in the context of Jesus' ministry, but was vitally important to those that this writer knew and loved.

Perhaps it is most helpful to hear the exchange on both levels—both among the religious authorities who are still trying to figure out who Jesus is, and among Jesus' later followers who can't seem to bear a convincing witness to their friends and families and can't believe that those they love can continue to be so blind; a situation that I somehow seem to recognize. Let's listen in to the progress of this conversation in the remainder of chapter 9, beginning at verse 13.

Seeing is Believing

Last year the Presbytery's interim group introduced me to Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Blink*, which was on the bestseller list for a time. The premise of this little book is that we see much more than we are willing to admit. Our senses take in much more information in the blink of an eye than our brains have the capacity to deal with. We can't "make sense" of all that we see, but we know it just the same. Often we are never sure how we know something and we talk about intuition or a "gut" feeling that we can't quite identify logically. Seeing seems to be a multi-faceted activity. Sometimes it takes a long time for all we see to actually come into focus.

There is so much to see in this little story from John. It starts by telling us that Jesus saw a man. The disciples, who have been absent for the last two chapters, begin to pelt Jesus with questions about the cause of suffering. Why **do** bad things happen to good people? Or to anyone for that matter? Must we assume that when we encounter tragedy there is an underlying cause for it? In spite of the biblical witness, including the book of Job where that righteous man absolutely refuses to admit to his friends or to his carping wife that anything he had done could possibly have caused the disasters that pile up on him and his family; there was a conventional linkage between sickness and sin. It's an idea that has been completely wiped out today—no one ever sits in my office asking, "Why is God punishing me in this way? Why me, I have tried so hard to be good?" And you have never prayed, "Oh, my God what have I done to deserve this." But Jesus refuses to be drawn into this deep discussion. He is only willing to remind them that there is a limited amount of time for him to do what God sent him to do. If he is going to be the light of the world, he needs to be about doing that, not developing intricate moral theology.

Jesus doesn't discuss it; he just does. We don't know if the blind man had heard any part of this opening conversation. We don't know what he may have already heard about Jesus. We don't know if he heard Jesus proclaim that he was the Light of the World at the festival described back in the last chapter. It just tells us that Jesus spat on the dust of the earth and made clay. (Hear the echo from the creation story in Genesis?) Jesus is the instrument of his re-creation as a seeing person. All he has to do is to be willing to wash. There is no declaration of allegiance or insistence on believing, just the instruction to go and wash. We don't even know if Jesus stays long enough for the man to look on him with his newly opened eyes.

And immediately we are embroiled in the controversy, not with authorities, but with his friends and neighbors who are very disturbed. There is no joy, only questions; no celebration, only quarrelling. Did you notice that some of them couldn't even recognize him anymore? They could only see a blind man, and when they encountered a man who could see, he seemed so different to them that they questioned his very identity? One encounter with Jesus and he was so changed they weren't even sure it was the same man? They want to know where Jesus is, but the man cannot tell them.

So, his neighbors bring him to the Pharisees for questioning. Those neighbors must have needed a confirmation of what they thought had happened from a higher authority. Perhaps someone with better credentials could explain this to them in a way that will make sense; please give us a rational explanation for what we think happened here. And, for the first time we hear that this healing had happened on a Sabbath. It is the kneading of the saliva into the dust to make clay

that would have technically been the sin—that would have clearly been **work** that was forbidden on the Sabbath. So the man repeats his story—although he carefully omits the part about making the mud in this telling—just that Jesus put the mud on his eyes. The Pharisees are divided about how to respond. There is the voice that says, “Oh, he violated the Sabbath laws,” but there is also the voice that says, “But how could a sinner have healed this man?” And they leave the last word to the man himself, “What do you say about him?” and the man concludes tentatively that Jesus must be a prophet. The same conclusion that the woman at the well made as she found out more about this man Jesus.

In the next scene, the man’s parents are called out. It merely says that the Jews did not believe—we have assumed that means a continuing of the conversation with the Pharisees, but it doesn’t say that. It seems like an aside to the casual reader of this chapter, but this exchange with the parents is the center of the story—scene four in a seven part drama—usually the place where we find the crux of the issues. The parents are willing to say that this is their son, and that indeed he has been blind since birth, but they cannot support his testimony about how he came to see. They weren’t there to actually see it happen, but what will it take for the family to be willing to stand up and say, “I have seen the evidence. What he says must be true.”? But they are afraid to say it. The narrator tells us they are afraid of the Jews; afraid of being “put out of the synagogue” (v22). You’ll have to ask him yourself. We aren’t willing to spread the good news.

So, they call the man to testify again. This will be the third time he has told the story. They press him to have a theological discussion by acknowledging that Jesus was a sinner. He starts by refusing to say more than, “I was blind and now I see” (v25). But as he talks, as he tells his story again, he realizes more and more about what has happened to him. He also realizes that the so-called authorities, who are supposed to know things, don’t know anything at all. Why can’t they see that if this man opens eyes, he must have been sent directly from God, but they keep insisting that they do not know where he came from. It’s in the telling of the story over and over again, that the man sees more and more, and that he can recognize the blindness of those around him. The authorities make an allusion back to that opening conversation about sin, and insist that no one who started out blind could possibly have anything to teach them. They have to reassure themselves that nothing new had happened here—nothing outside of their comfortable frame of reference—nothing that would force them to rethink any of their cherished assumptions. And they throw him out; out of their presence; out of the conversation; out of the synagogue.

And it is outside the synagogue; outside his circle of friends and neighbors who only know him as the blind beggar; outside the family that was afraid to support him; outside the prescribed community of the Jews, that the man encounters Jesus again. It’s as if Jesus was waiting for him; waiting for him to witness to the people he knew best; waiting for him even if the others could not accept what he had to say; waiting for him to discover how much he really could see. Jesus will say to him, “believe what you have seen, I am the one” And a man born blind is finally willing to say, “Lord, I believe” (v38) and to fall down and worship.

In the last scene, we discover that some among the Pharisees have been eavesdropping on this last conversation. They are impelled to ask; surely we aren’t the ones who are blind? And Jesus returns in judgment to the opening discussion about sin and declares that if you’ve got all this

information and you still refuse to see, yes, you are the ones who are blind. And it is your sin that causes the tragedy of that blindness.

I told you at the beginning that this was a drama on two levels. We have action in Jerusalem near the pool of Siloam as a man tries to explain how it is that he can see. We also have action in John's first century community as they try to defend their beliefs about Jesus to a skeptical world. But the more time I spend with this story, the more clearly I see another level of the drama. The greatest miracle is that Jesus saw a man and wanted wholeness for him. Actually, the Greek is missing any article before this word suggesting perhaps that Jesus saw not a particular man, but humanity in general. Our God recognized that we were blind; that we could not comprehend what God was like at all. So Jesus is sent to become the instrument of the re-creation of humanity—the fountain of living water in his person is mixed with the dust of the earth to give us a new beginning; a new beginning that becomes clear to the world when we are willing to wash in the waters of baptism. In this story, it is the man himself who is on trial; on trial with his neighbors and his family and the religious authorities and with the world. Those who have been blessed by an encounter with Jesus run into trouble because the Good News has enemies. It had enemies in Jerusalem and in the synagogues of the Diaspora and in the post enlightenment affluent world that we live in as well. We are called to defend that experience—even if we can't really explain it very well over and over again—until we can finally see; until we can bring all the fragments of our knowing into focus. Can we believe what has happened? Or, like the parents in the center of this story do we just report it without conviction, without announcing that anything out of the ordinary has happened at all; we might know something about it, but have no experience of our own. This story tells us what life is like for those of us living in the in between—in between Jesus' first appearance and the second coming; trying to make sense of it all somewhere between saying, "I don't know where he is" (v12) and "Lord, I believe" (v38) so that we can fall down and worship. Jesus has promised to nourish us on the way. Come to the table, no matter where you are in that in between—you'll find Jesus is waiting for you.