

Encounters with Jesus: Journey to Sight

John 9:1-41

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Churches of Portland and Decatur, Indiana on March 5, 2017]

I

Wow! What a lengthy gospel reading!

I told you several weeks ago that some of the readings from John's Gospel are quite long.

In considering how I might shorten today's reading, I was reminded of an internet site called "Book-a-Minute."

The motto of "Book-a-Minute" tells you all you need to know:

When even Cliff Notes are too long.

So I looked up a few of the edited books on their website, and this is what I found.

Remember Dr. Seuss' Green Eggs and Ham? This is how "Book-a-Minute" tells it:

Some Creature: I won't eat green eggs and ham anywhere, anytime, under any circumstances.

Sam I Am: Here, try it.

Some Creature: Yum.

THE END

Or perhaps you've read Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen. Here's the Book-a-Minute version:

Mr. Darcy: Nothing is good enough for me.

Ms. Elizabeth Bennet: I could never marry that proud man.

They change their minds.

THE END

And then there is A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens:

Ebenezer Scrooge: Bah, humbug. You'll work thirty-eight hours on Christmas Day, keep the heat at five degrees, and like it.

Ghost of Jacob Marley: Ebenezer Scrooge, three ghosts of Christmas will come and tell you you're mean.

Three Ghosts of Christmas: You're mean.

Ebenezer Scrooge: At last, I have seen the light. Let's dance in the streets. Have some money.

THE END

II

I got to wondering how Book-a-Minute would condense the story of the man born blind who was healed by Jesus. It would probably be something like this:

Blind Man: "Help, I can't see."

Jesus: "Here's mud in your eye."

Blind Man: "So this is what pizza looks like!"

THE END

Of course, the flaw in the "Book-a-Minute" concept is that most stories cannot adequately be told in three or four short sentences.

There is always background that must be understood,
characters to be developed,
and issues to be resolved.

In the case of Holy Scripture, there are always minor nuances that have major implications in the story.

And in John's Gospel,
 as we've seen over and over,
 there are layers of meaning that are like veins of precious metal—
 gold or silver,
 just waiting to be mined.

So as much as I would like to preach a "Sermon in a Minute" and then we could all go home and take a nap, I can't do it.

We had to hear all 41 verses of John chapter 9,
 because the story is so rich and complex...
 and the message of the story is too important.

So bear with me while together we try to grasp what the blind man's encounter with Jesus has to say to us.

III

As (Jesus) walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. (9:1)

Being born blind is a rare occurrence, at least in our country.

In the U.S., about 4 out of every 10,000 children are certified as blind before their first birthday.

And while that fact is sad enough, for one to be born blind in Jesus' day was much, much worse.

In the first century blindness was connected to sin.

If you were blind, it wasn't an accident or a birth defect or a mistake;
 it was God's judgment,
 God's punishment for sin.

But whose sin was it, the child's or the parent's?

That is the question the disciples are asking Jesus.

Don't you love the answer that Jesus gives?

"It was neither," he says.

Blindness and sin are not necessarily related.

Jesus goes on to say that, in this case, the man's blindness allows the power of God to be displayed.

Jesus refocuses the disciples' attention on the real issue—
the man's need for healing and the glory of God.

"Stop asking abstract moral questions and get about the business of bringing glory to God by relieving suffering and healing the broken."

Then, Jesus,
 echoing the creation story of Genesis 2
 when God formed Adam of the dust of the ground,
 very simply spits on the dusty ground,
 makes a paste of mud,
 spreads it over the man's blind eyes,
 and tells him to go and wash it off.

When he did, he was healed.

It was amazing!

IV

But not everyone is pleased.

This remarkable gift of sight did not evoke wonder,
 joy,
 and thanksgiving,
 but rather confusion,
 consternation,
 and controversy.

Arguments break out, first as the formerly blind man encounters his perplexed neighbors,

and then as he is brought before the religious authorities for an official investigation of the healing and the Healer.

The Pharisees are not impressed.

They want to know how it happened.

*“Who did this,
why did he do it,
when did he do it,
where is he now?”*

When the formerly blind man first explains the healing,
they don’t believe him.

When the Pharisees realize that the healing was done on the Sabbath,
they are even more upset.

Healing on the Sabbath was allowed in cases of emergency,
but healing one who was congenitally blind could have waited a day.

There were 39 categories of work that were forbidden on the Sabbath,
and one of them was “kneading”—as in kneading bread.

Jesus making a paste of clay and saliva is clearly a violation of that rule.

The Pharisees ask the man about his healing—

“What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”

Amid all the wrangling, the man arrives at a moment of insight:

“He is a prophet.” (v. 17)

When the Pharisees call in the blind man’s parents to certify the healing, their answer is vague:

“Well, we know this is our son, and we know he used to be blind...”

but that's all we know for sure."

It was a kangaroo court of the first order

They question the man again, and this time his frustration reaches the boiling point.

"I've already told you how I was healed, and you didn't believe me. Do you want to become a follower of Jesus, too?"

Now the Pharisees are livid.

They don't care about the blind man.

They don't care about his healing.

All they really want is to find evidence to use against Jesus,
to trick him into saying or doing something that they could use to crucify
him...

and this was the best chance they had so far.

So now they dismiss the formerly blind man with a rather insulting comment.

"You were born entirely in sin, and you are trying to teach us? Get out of here!"

And they send him away.

V

Thankfully, the story doesn't end there.

There is one more conversation left in the story, and from it, I believe, we glean an important lesson from the healing of the man born blind.

Jesus explains to the man who was healed that his purpose in this world is "to give sight to the blind, and to give blindness to the sighted."

Verse 39:

*“I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see,
and those who do see may become blind.”*

What a strange thing to say—that Jesus would make some people blind.

But it is only strange if we take his words literally.

What Jesus, in fact, was saying is this:

*To some I will give sight,
and to others I will take away insight.*

The Pharisees thought they knew the truth.

They were absolutely convinced that blindness was evidence of a sinful life.

So too was the leper,
the deaf mute,
the barren woman,
the paralyzed man,
and the epileptic child.

Each of their maladies was proof of the person’s sin against Almighty God.

It was a black and white world for the Jewish leaders;
their judgments were rigid and immediate.

If you didn't live like them,
and look like them,
and worship like them,
and believe like them,
you were wrong,
and they were right,
and you were rejected.

The Pharisees only saw things in black and white,
while the world around them wallowed in the many shades of gray.

They became blind to the needs of people,
and saw only broken laws and unmet religious rules, and sin.

VI

There are times when the 21st century church looks and sounds an awful lot like the Pharisees of first century Judaism.

We become the Pharisees when we make judgments about people,
 without knowing the circumstances of their lives;
 when we insist on simple answers to complicated problems
 and the ambiguous issues of our age.

We are the Pharisees when rules are more important than people,
 and when human performance carries more weight than grace and love.

When we become blind to the hurting and the poor and the rejected of our day,
 then the words of Jesus echo down the corridors of time

*“I came into the world so that those who do not see may see...
 and those who do see may become blind.”*

Now I am not saying that as Christians we should not have convictions.

Convictions are an integral part of who we are as God’s people.

But when we make our convictions absolute,
 when we impose our convictions on others;
 when we insist that our way is the right way...
 the only way,
 and those who disagree are absolutely wrong,
 then we are blind.

Literally, the Hebrew word “Pharisee” means “People who have separated themselves.”

We see that happening in the Christian church, as we build walls to insulate ourselves from those who are different—
 the blind,
 the Muslim,
 the African American,
 the incarcerated,

the homosexual,
 the deaf,
 the divorced...
 and the list goes on and on.

Like the Pharisees, we claim that we are right because the Laws of Moses and the words of the prophets are on our side.

But when we read about the life and the love of Jesus...
 how he was always reaching out to the outsiders and the outcasts,
 the rejected and the forsaken...
 it ought to make us ask ourselves—
 are we following the way of Jesus,
 or are we trapped in our own narrow, self-righteous blindness?

VII

I read about a pastor who was preaching on this story, and he had folded into each worship bulletin, adhesive labels which said either “I AM ALWAYS RIGHT!” or “I MIGHT BE WRONG.”

He then asked people to stick the labels on their lapels and wear them during the passing of the peace.

Well, the sanctuary was a-buzz with wonderful conversation and laughter.

But on the way home that day, the pastor forgot that he was still wearing the label which read, I AM ALWAYS RIGHT!

At the gas station he received a rather chilly response from the attendant.

When he stopped at the grocery store, the clerk seemed almost afraid of him, and the conversation was brief and sterile.

And it wasn't until he got home that his wife blurted out,
“You're not always right! In fact, you're hardly ever right!”

And then he remembered the gas station and the grocery store, and he realized the negative impact of always thinking you are absolutely right.

It stifles conversation,
it eliminates tolerance,
and it erects walls of separation.

So the pastor said, “These days, I wear a different label: *I might be wrong.*”

VIII

Sisters and brothers, when Jesus died on the cross,
he tore down the walls of separation and judgment.

He modeled for us how love can be more powerful than judgment.

So why would we want to rebuild those walls?

Why would we want to separate ourselves from the very people whom Jesus loves?

It is a question that Jesus must be asking, each time we proclaim the absolute rightness of our convictions and interpretations.

We have all been born blind,
but our eyes are opened when we encounter the grace and power of God in
Jesus Christ,
the Light of the world.

He illumines for us life’s meaning and purpose,
transforming the way we see ourselves and the world around us.

Once we have seen the Light of Grace,
we cannot go back to the darkness.

As spring approaches and the days become brighter and longer,
may Jesus enlighten our hearts and minds to those who might not be wrong.

And may the eyes of our hearts be open to **all** the people whom God calls us to love.

Amen.

Sources:

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