

Out of Step with the World

John 9:1-41

The story concerns two blind men who had been healed by Jesus, who happened to meet one day, and they were so excited to meet someone else who had been healed. They talked about the wonder of sight, the color of flowers, the beauty of butterflies, the glory of sunrises, the faces of children and grandchildren.

They talked about the wonder of having seen the face of Jesus. They were laughing and having a great time together, when one of them said, "And do you remember how Jesus took that mud, spit on it, and put it into your eye?"

The other fellow looked kind of stunned, and answered, "Why no, he simply said, 'Receive your sight,' and I could see."

The first fellow said, "Wait a minute - now just wait a minute here. You mean he didn't use any mud?"

"No."

"Well, did he at least have you wash in the pool of Siloam?"

"No - of course not - who ever heard of anything so ridiculous as mud in your eye?!"

"Well," said the first man, "if he didn't put mud in your eyes and have you wash in the pool of Siloam, you are still blind! Blind - do you hear me?"

Because that's the way Jesus healed me; that's the way he does it!"

Then the second man began to get angry. He shouted, "Mud, mud, mud! Who ever heard of using mud?! That's the dumbest thing I have ever heard! You still have mud in your eyes. You're the one who's still blind!"

They got into a big argument - their relationship was destroyed, and right then and there, they formed the first two denominations: the Mudites and the Antimudites!

Since then, of course, the church has been fighting and splitting over issues not a whole lot more significant than that!

Today's Gospel lesson is one of the miracle stories recorded by John, one of the many signs of Jesus' authority that the Fourth Gospel reports. This one is somewhat special, because here, one who was blind from birth is cured by Jesus. We should note here that the Gospel writers,

and John, in particular, often used blindness and other disabilities as vehicles for Jesus' signs. The Jewish world of the times viewed illness and disability as resulting from sin. In fact, in this 9th chapter of John, Jesus disputes this understanding. Let us understand that for the Gospel writers, and especially for John, physical blindness is a far less serious disability than is spiritual blindness.

Our lesson for today contains many different characters, and in fact, many different focuses which could be the subject of many a sermon. One could preach from now until Christmas on this one chapter, and still not exhaust all the lessons from this important story. One could, but I promise that I won't. For today, I would like us to focus on the one who emerges as the unlikely hero of the story: the one who was born blind, and whose eyes were opened by Jesus.

He is not like many of our Biblical heroes. He was an ordinary person, not powerful like Solomon or David, he didn't lead an army like Joshua, he wasn't a great prophet like Isaiah or Jeremiah. He didn't have the kind of history shaping experience with God that Moses had. His relationship was on a very personal level with the Incarnate God of the cross. In fact, the Gospel writer doesn't even record the man's name. But he was a person who came to faith, and whose faith we see grow in the face of tremendous pressure. He is subjected to pressure, and even threats, but throughout it all we see his faith become stronger.

We can see the progression of his faith as the story develops:

In verse 11, when he is asked, *"How were your eyes opened?"* his response mentions, *"A man called Jesus."*

In verse 17, when asked, *"What do you say about him, since he opened your eyes?"* he answers, *"He is a prophet."*

By the time we get to the end of the story, John reports that he said to Jesus, *"Lord, I believe"*, and then he worshipped him.

All the while this ordinary person was being badgered and berated by the highly educated Pharisees, he held firm to what he knew was the truth. It certainly would have been easier for him to have simply said what he knew the Pharisees wanted to hear. After all, they were the educated, the elite, and this man certainly had no theological training, he was simply one who had had an encounter with Jesus. There were no preconditions, no expectations. Jesus didn't say to him, *"If you will worship me, I will heal you."*

No, Jesus, apparently without any direct conversation with the blind man, simply went about the work he was sent to do, and the man responded with love and gratitude. No matter what the Pharisees said or did to him, the man who was healed wasn't about to deny what he knew to be the truth.

Our hero is not really so unusual in the history of the church; Christians have always had

enemies in the world. After the time of John's Gospel, things got much worse for believers. When the wrath of the Roman Empire came down upon Christians, untold numbers died for their faith. Most of them, like the man in our Gospel lesson, were ordinary people, whose names we don't know, but who were unwilling to deny what they knew was the truth, unwilling to take the easy route.

At various times in history, Christians have been called upon to lay down their lives, rather than give up their faith. And our faith is alive today because of all those who went before us, most of whom were ordinary people, who were willing to put their lives at risk for the Gospel, people whose names we don't know, who were known only to their families, and to God.

In 21st Century America, it is unlikely any of us here will be required to die for our faith. No, today the Church faces a different kind of dilemma. Today, our society really doesn't persecute Christians, it does something far worse: it just ignores us. In much of our society today, Jesus Christ is viewed as merely irrelevant. God? That's a quaint notion from days gone by.

The world today is far more sophisticated and better educated than it has ever been. Consider some of the recent developments the world has seen:

Telescopes let us look across galaxies; space ships routinely circle the globe and return safely to earth; microscopes probe the mysteries of the atoms; genetic engineering is on the verge of both exciting and terrifying possibilities; supersonic jets cross oceans and continents in hours; and the internet and social networking has spurred revolutions and changed the way people communicate, and possibly even think.

Yet we still come to worship the one who was born in an obscure little town in the Middle East 2,000 years ago. Even Seminary professors refer to our times as the "post-Christian age." Yet we still come. Why? Perhaps because, like the man in the Gospel story, we know the truth. We have an advantage over our gospel hero, because we know the whole story. We have faith in the Christ of the cross, who died and was raised from death; and in whose victory we each have a share.

We affirm what we know each week when we come to worship. We come together to as a community, to offer praise and thanksgiving to our God. Of course, here it's easy. Here we can stand up and say, "*Lord, I believe*" without fear that anyone will laugh at us, or mock us, or even engage us in serious debate.

But, when we leave here, the world is more hostile, more threatening. In the places where we spend the other six days of the week, it's a lot harder to talk about our faith. It's difficult, in many of the situations we find ourselves each week, to say aloud, "*Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.*" Out there, when we make such a confession, we take risks. We risk embarrassment, we risk rejection, and sometimes we risk exclusion from groups that seem socially desirable. Affirming and sharing our faith with people outside our circle of friends within the church involves taking all sorts of risks. Yet we are called by the Gospel to take those kinds of risks, to

put our faith above our personal comfort.

Denominations and individual churches are constantly making plans for great programs of evangelism. But, in actual fact, evangelism works most effectively when people are willing to quietly share their faith with their family and friends and neighbors, that is, with people they know. Although some are called to street preaching, and other forms of evangelism directed at the masses, the fact is that most of us are not. But each one of us is called to witness for our faith, whenever a situation presents itself. Jesus' great commission, to his disciples, recorded at the end of Matthew's Gospel, was to go and make disciples of all nations, and included the promise that, *"I am with you always, to the close of the age."*

We don't need a great deal of theological training to share our faith with others, we don't need to have all the answers to the many questions raised by the well educated skeptics of the world.

Our hero from the gospel lesson shows us how faith can carry the day. At one point, frustrated by the questioning he confesses simply, *"the one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see."* That testimony is pretty difficult with which to argue.

Consider the experience of our hero: Jesus lets him see the light, then Jesus goes away. Jesus is out of the story for awhile, and the man is left by himself, to witness to the unbelievers, to face up to the skeptics about what he knows to be true. Surely, he must have felt lonely and inadequate to the task. But then near the end of the story, Jesus returns, and reveals himself to the man - who worships him. That's the promise that Jesus made to the Church, that one day he would return, and it is in anticipation of that day that the church has maintained its witness for our Lord.

Jesus said that anyone who would follow him must take up their cross, and come after him. Although it may be unlikely that any one of us here will be called to die for our faith, each one of us is surely called to live for it, each day of our lives, wherever we may be.

Rev. John W. Caster
Trinity Presbyterian Church
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