

“Faith-Forming Conversations” (Part 1)

John 9

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Bill’s Bombers took to the field for our opening games of the season Wednesday night, with Seely and Lang on the mound. Yanz was our first player to reach base; Carr at shortstop had a number of outstanding throws to Van Dyke at first; rookie player Anna Seely got a hit in her first-ever at bat. But the team was severely handicapped by a shortage of women, with the result that we were getting two automatic outs every time we went through the lineup. We held up all right in the first inning but got utterly decimated in the second as the opposing team scored 15 runs, and the game came to an abrupt end in the third inning when their lead increased to 20 and the mercy rule kicked into effect. We shook the dust off our shoes between games, and a number of phone calls were made to bring in some additional support, including two of our star players from last year. In the second game there was some excitement in the fourth inning when rookie manager A. Pinches drove in rookie player C. Pinches to score our first run of the season, and we even managed to load the bases in the fifth, walking away with a 19-3 loss and rejoicing that the second game had gone dramatically better than the first. Clearly, the team needs some practice, and some additional fan support would surely help too. Next games are Wednesday night at Bond Park, two blocks down the hill. It’s “root, root root for the Bombers; if they don’t win it’s a shame; ‘cause it’s one, two, three strikes you’re out, at the ole’ ball game!”

As I stood at our bench keeping score, I found myself thinking about what a wonderful outreach opportunity this. We have rounded up a number of players for our team who have no other affiliation with our church. Some of them have played with us for one or two years now; others were brand new Wednesday night; most of these added-on players are young – in their teens or twenties. Last year coach Harkness invited every member of the team to come to church one Sunday wearing their Bombers shirts, but the only ones who responded to the invitation were the ones who we already see here regularly. Maybe some of these people go to a different church, but my hunch is that many of them probably aren’t going *anywhere* on Sunday mornings. They’re a great addition to our team, and we have fun interacting with them – but what does their *spiritual* life look like, what kind of *faith* do they have (if any), and – most importantly – how do we even *begin* talking about matters of faith with people we know? You remember my joke from a few weeks back, what do you get when you cross a Presbyterian with a Jehovah’s witness – someone who knocks on the door and doesn’t have anything to say. Well, these teammates aren’t random strangers; these are people that we *know* to some extent; they’re part of the team! What do we say? What if some of these people didn’t grow up in a church,

don't really understand why people go to church, have some basic understanding that there's a god, but know virtually *nothing* about Jesus Christ and his saving work on our behalf? Where do we even *start*?

It's easier when we're working with children. We put 'em in Sunday School! Tell them the basic stories, teach them "Jesus Loves Me," introduce them to worship, maybe even use some good, old-fashioned flannel board. Spend a number of years working on them, eventually some of them come to a point where they are ready to claim the faith for their very own. But when you're trying to reach adults or young adults, and your only real connection is through softball, where do you even start?

Enter a certain blind beggar, in the gospel of John. A man who, at the start of the story, has no faith in Jesus and no real understanding of who Jesus is. Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud, wipes it in the man's eyes, tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, and when he does, the man gains his sight. But he still has no faith and no real understanding of who Jesus truly is. He goes home, people ask him how he can now see, he responds, "*The man they call Jesus made some mud,*" and so forth. "The man they call Jesus." Not, "the Son of God." Not, "Jesus Christ." Not, "Savior" or "Lord." Just "the man they call Jesus." The man can now see, but he has no faith and no real understanding of who Jesus truly is.

Do you know how many people in our world are like that? People who have no faith and no real understanding of who Jesus truly is? *A lot*. A whole lot! As the story of the blind man unfolds over the course of John 9, he develops *faith* in Jesus Christ, and by the end of the chapter is calling him *Lord*. There's a *significant progression* that takes place here, a *spiritual development* in this man's life, as he goes from no faith to faith, from "the man they call Jesus" to "Lord, I believe." That development occurs because *two things* happen: (1) the Holy Spirit works in his life, just as the Holy Spirit works in *our* lives as we come to believe in Jesus, and (2) *people have conversations with him*. Conversations about *Jesus*.

I want to give you something. A handout, that comes from a book that was written forty years ago by two faculty members at the Wheaton College Graduate School of Theology, that I just learned about last month and that is as relevant now as it was when it was published. The book is called *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?* and it addresses the reality that a church can have great preaching and great programs and still be *completely* failing to reach people with the good news and nurture them in the faith. The authors lay out a model, a process, by which people come to have *faith* in Jesus. They take seriously the reality that people could be at a *number* of different places in their spiritual journey. They might have an awareness that there is some kind of supernatural power or powers in the universe, but no meaningful knowledge of what Christianity is all about. As they become more aware of Christianity, they might become genuinely *interested*. They might learn some basic facts about Christianity, some things about Jesus or some Christian beliefs. If they continue to go deeper (that's why the arrow is going down; people go *deeper* in their faith), they will begin to grasp that the gospel has significant implications, for the world *and* for their own personal life. If they develop a positive attitude to the gospel they might reach a point where they realize just how much they *need* what Jesus has to offer. There comes a point where they have a major *decision* to make, whether or not to *commit* to this way of life. If they commit, they will undoubtedly find that some aspects of their life stand under Christ's judgment, and will need to ask God for help to change those. They begin to reach out in faith towards the author of Life and the giver of salvation, drawing mercy and strength from Jesus Christ and

the Holy Spirit. As that continues to happen, as they commit themselves, body and soul, to Jesus Christ, a disciple is born. Then, as their Christian faith matures and grows, a number of other things will begin to happen, not necessarily in a linear fashion, but these categories are right on the money: initiation into the church, becoming part of the process of making other disciples, growth in their understanding of the faith, growth in Christian character, discovery and use of their gifts, developing a Christian lifestyle, stewardship of resources, prayer, openness to others, and effective sharing of their faith and life. (Most of us Presbyterians never seem to reach that *last* stage – “effective sharing of their faith and life” – which is a weakness we’re trying to shore up around here!) This is a very helpful model, outlining clearly that coming to faith in Jesus Christ is a *process*, a process that can go wrong at any number of places.

That blind man in John’s gospel – he probably starts out at a -9 or -10 on this chart: “awareness of the supernatural” or “no effective knowledge of Christianity.” In his mind, Jesus is just *a man!* But as the chapter progresses, as the Holy Spirit moves and as conversations unfold, he moves down the chart. He grows in both faith and commitment. I’ll show you how that happens next week.

I want you to take three things away from this message today. First, take that handout. Take it home, look it over, ponder it. *Think about some people that you know* who may not have any kind of church connection, may not have any real faith in Jesus. Ask yourself: Where would they fall on this diagram? Second, take the story of the blind man. I’d like to encourage you to read the rest of the chapter between now and next Sunday. Watch how the blind man comes to faith and commitment. Third, I want you to take home an understanding that for somebody to come to faith, two things need to happen. They are *exactly* the same two things that enabled the blind man to come to faith. The first is that the Holy Spirit needs to work in that person’s life. That truly is between God and that person, and you have *absolutely no control over that*. But the second, *necessary* ingredient is one that you *do* have control over. For somebody to come to faith in Jesus Christ, *there have to be people willing to talk with that person about Jesus*. People need a safe place where they can talk openly with *people they trust*. They need people who are willing to listen, willing to share, willing to answer questions, willing to *talk*. In most cases those early and important conversations don’t happen in a *church building*. They happen in people’s homes, they happen in coffee shops, they might even happen at a softball field. And they happen with people like *you*. I told you my story of how I completely walked away from the faith and how God brought me back again. It wasn’t the college chaplain or any local pastor who made the most difference in my early faith development – it was my *peers*. My *friends*. A group of people who had a stronger faith than I did and who were willing to listen, to share, and to answer questions – and boy, did I have a lot of questions! I came to faith in large part because I had friends who created an environment where I felt *safe* to ask questions about Jesus. If we hadn’t had those conversations, I doubt very much that I would be a Christian today. Those conversations *matter!* It’s something we Presbyterians aren’t very good at, something that causes us to stretch outside our comfort zone, something that, honestly, we haven’t really encouraged; something that, truthfully, *we’re going to need to learn how to do*.

We’re going to stop there for now. We’ll pick this up next week. Take the handout, take John 9, take the awareness that *your conversations matter*. Your conversations about *Jesus* matter.

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