

“He Put Mud on My Eyes”

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John 9:1-41

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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Fourth Sunday in Lent

Two weeks ago I talked about Nicodemus; last week it was the Samaritan woman at the well; today it is the man born blind. All three of these people had significant conversations with Jesus that left them radically changed. In each case, *faith* formed in the hearts of these very different people. Jesus can touch the heart of an esteemed Jewish rabbi, just as much as he can touch the heart of a woman with a checkered history from a marginalized people, just as much as he can touch the heart of a blind beggar who gets kicked out of his faith community. Just as much as he can touch *your* heart, and *mine*. No matter where you are in life, in society, or in your faith, Jesus can *find* you and *love* you.

The story begins like this: “As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” The disciples are making assumptions. We have a habit of making assumptions when we encounter people who are less able-bodied or less fortunate than we are. We make even *more* assumptions when that person is begging for food or for money – which, we learn, is precisely what this man was doing. He’s blind, *and* he’s a beggar. Jesus’s disciples make some assumptions about *why* this man is the way he is. *Somebody* must have done something wrong. The man’s blindness *must* be some kind of punishment from God.

But sometimes our assumptions are just plain wrong. “Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’” Sometimes God has a *purpose* for our lives that is not at all obvious to us. This man surely never imagined that we would still be talking about him twenty centuries later. We talk about him not only because of what Jesus did in his life, but also because of how he *responded* to what Jesus did. That response has a lot to teach us. “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day,” says Jesus; “night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” This man has spent his life living in darkness. Jesus is about to bring *light* into his life. Physical light – and also *spiritual* light.

Jesus “spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes.” The mud was not necessary; Jesus performs many healings without mud. But this recalls how God created humanity, in the very beginning: “the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” *Life* comes from *earth*.

“Go,” says Jesus; “wash in the pool of Siloam.” This pool is mentioned in the Old Testament and in other ancient sources; it had been built by King Hezekiah about eight hundred years before Jesus and was located in the lower part of the city of Jerusalem. It was a reservoir for fresh water that came

through a tunnel from a natural spring just outside Jerusalem. That reservoir of water made it possible for people to *live* in Jerusalem. Some biblical scholars think it may have also been used for ritual purification. But this blind beggar didn't need ritual purification. He needed something ... *more*.

The man does as Jesus instructs him. "He went and washed and came back able to see." John states it so matter-of-factly, but this was a watershed moment in this man's life! People are amazed. "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Yes, indeed, it's the same man. People ask him how it happened. "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They want to know: "Where is he?" Where is the man who healed you? But the formerly blind beggar does not know. Jesus is nowhere to be found.

The news of this healing reaches the Pharisees, the religious leaders and teachers of the Jewish Law. They bring the man before him. They are bothered that it is a Sabbath day, when they should be rejoicing that this man can now see. Their sights are set on the wrong thing. Some of them conclude that Jesus "is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." Others are a bit more charitable. "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" In their confusion, they ask the beggar: "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He replies: "He is a prophet." He now knows: Jesus is not just a man, but a *prophet*. This man has taken an important first step on his spiritual journey.

The religious leaders continue investigating. They go to the man's parents. "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" They reply: yes, this is our son; yes, he was born blind; no, we don't know how he can now see. "Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." Their answers are not quite honest. They *did* know who healed their son. They *lied*. Why? Because they were *afraid*. "His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue." They were afraid they would be *excommunicated*. Never allowed to worship in their synagogue ever again.

Let's be clear. Religious leaders should go about their business in ways that motivate people to be *honest*. Not strike such fear into people's hearts that people have to *lie* to protect themselves.

These religious leaders go back to the beggar. They have more questions. "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." That is: *tell us what we want to hear*. God is on *our* side. But this man who has come to see (in a physical sense) and is coming to see (in a spiritual sense) is not willing to lie. He's going to tell them the *truth* – no matter what the cost. "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." This answer is not satisfactory to them. "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" This man is taking another step on his spiritual journey. He is now recognizing that Jesus doesn't just *heal* people. He's somebody worth *following*. The religious leaders reply: "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." These religious leaders are doing a *great* job refusing to see the truth. Denying the all-too-obvious reality that Jesus *was sent by God* and *is doing God's work* in the world. They are so stuck in their traditions, their mindsets, their prejudices, and their biases that they cannot see *God working in their midst*. The man is amazed at their inability or unwillingness to see the truth. "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since

the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” Preach it, man, *preach it!* Teach these teachers! Tell them what’s *true!* The only explanation for why Jesus could heal him is that Jesus *must have come from God.* This man has just taken another step – or two! – in his spiritual journey. *He* knows where Jesus came from, even if *they* refuse to accept it. And he’s now got the courage to stand up to them and say it *boldly.*

They will have none of that. “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And “they drove him out.” They kick him out of the synagogue. He’s gained his sight, but he loses his faith community. That’s okay, though. There’s a *different* community that will happily welcome him.

Word spreads. “Jesus heard that they had driven him out.” Jesus probably knew that would happen. The things that Jesus is doing are forcing people to choose: are you *with* him, or are you *against* him? This man is choosing Jesus, but that choice has come with a cost. Jesus goes to him. Jesus does that, you know. He comes to us when we are in *need*, like this man was when he was blind. But Jesus also comes to us when we are *hurting.* “When he found him he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’” This man has been through a lot. Blind since birth, poor, begging. He can see now, but he’s also been excommunicated. After everything he has been through, after everything he has come to realize about the man who healed him, can he see now who Jesus *really* is? The Son of Man, the *Messiah?*

He’s not quite there yet. He needs a little more clarification. He asks: “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” He’s so close! He’s right on the edge, right on the cusp of full *faith* in Jesus! “Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’” That’s the clincher; that was the final piece the man needed to hear. “He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshiped him.”

That word “worship” – do you know what it means? Merriam-Webster says it means “to honor or show reverence for as a divine being or supernatural power” or “to regard with great or extravagant respect, honor, or devotion.” In Greek, the word meant to kiss the hand, like a dog licks its master, an act expressing great appreciation; or to fall upon one’s knees and touch the ground with one’s forehead, an expression of profound reverence. That’s what we do here. We kiss the hand of Jesus, our Master, expressing our thanks; we fall on our knees, showing our reverence for God. This is what this man is now doing. Expressing his gratitude, his reverence for Jesus. Worshiping Jesus, his Master and Lord.

“Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.’” *Judgment* has to do with making a *decision.* Rendering a *verdict.* In John, it refers to the judgment, the verdict, that we make about *Jesus.* Do we, or do we not, acknowledge Jesus for who he *really* is? That judgment has a consequence: “so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind.” The blind beggar has come to see, both *literally* and *figuratively.* He has come to a decision, a verdict; he has rendered a judgment: Jesus is a prophet, someone worthy of following, someone who has come from God, the Son of Man, the Messiah, his Master and his Lord.

The religious leaders have also rendered a judgment about Jesus. “Surely,” they ask Jesus, “we are not blind, are we?” Jesus answers: “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.” They have made their choice. They remain stuck in spiritual blindness.

So that is the story of the blind man. It is a journey towards faith. Because faith is a journey.

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