

“OF SPIT, MUD, AND MIRACLES”

John 9:1-12,24-25, 35-41 March 26th, 2017

There is a beautiful hymn in the Presbyterian church taken from a prayer written by Richard of Chichester in the Middle Ages:

Dear Lord, three things I pray,
to see thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
follow thee more nearly,
day by day.

This chapter of the Gospel of John, which includes the healing of a blind beggar, is not just about a miracle Jesus did many years ago. It is about seeing reality and seeing Jesus more clearly today.

We are now four weeks into Lent and into this “Living Our Baptismal Calling Series. After considering the story of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman and how they are connected to our baptismal vows, this week we consider the story of Jesus restoring sight to the man born blind. We will reflect on the role of the community of faith in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ. In the baptismal covenant the community of faith plays a critical role. The gathered worshipping community is asked:

Will you nurture these persons in Christ’s holy Church, that by your teaching and example, they may be guided to accept God’s grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life?

How does a community nurture a person in the faith? How do WE in this faith community act out this part of the baptismal covenant? And what insights into that task might be found in this story about Jesus healing a man who has been

blind since birth? Do we want our eyes opened to the truth? So often we do not want to look at the truth of our world as it is, with its injustices, violence and hatred, the oppression of the weak and of minorities, the divisions between rich and poor.

We do not want to see our own inner reality, our brokenness and fear. We pretend that everything is all right and that we are all right. Why are we frightened of the truth? Is it because everything seems so terrible, that if we see reality too clearly we will fall into despair?

Yet if we seek deeper, we will find underneath our brokenness the beauty in our own hearts and in the heart of each person: our capacity to love, to give life and to take our place in the world-with others-to become a source of life and hope. If we saw more clearly, if our eyes of faith were opened, we would discover an immense hope coming from Jesus.

There are three distinct communities in this story: the disciples of Jesus; the neighbors who had known the blind beggar and his family since the man was born; and a small group of Pharisees. Each community responds in a different way to what they witness.

The disciples are the only ones to actually hear the conversation between Jesus and the blind beggar. They are eyewitnesses to their master making mud out of spit and dirt, spreading it on the man's eyes, and ordering him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. Could it really be that simple? Jesus gives sight to a man blind from birth with just a little spit, some ordinary dirt, and a few words? It just seems so improbable. In fact, the religious leaders, the disciples, and the man's parents have real problems with the whole scenario. But not the man, who can now see clearly. He believes and worships Jesus. It seems that everybody but

Jesus and the unnamed-but-now-sighted man misses the forest for the trees, so to speak, about this miracle.

Actually, the disciples don't seem to be all that interested in the man regaining his sight. They are distracted by wanting to know the cause of the man's blindness. They believe, as did most people in this time period, that a person suffering from a physical or mental ailment was being punished for sin. And so the disciples wonder aloud whether this man is blind because of his own sin, or because of the sins of his parents.

It appears that once the man went off to the pool of Siloam to wash the mud out of his eyes as Jesus instructed him, the disciples do not encounter him again until the end of the story when the newly sighted man becomes a member of the community of followers of Jesus himself. It is not clear from the text whether they even witnessed the man's miraculous healing, although we could guess that, having witnessed Jesus healing many people before, they simply trusted that the man would be able to see as Jesus promised. John implies that after Jesus put the mud on the man and sent him to the pool, the disciples went on their way, and their interaction with the blind man ended. It is not clear whether they were present during Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees.

As a community, then, the disciples do nothing to nurture this man in the faith. They seem to have little sympathy for him as a human being, and their main concern is to know exactly who is to blame for his condition.

The Rev. Duane Steele reflects on this text from a different perspective. He writes: "I know what it's like to live in the shadow of powerful labels like that, because I myself have been totally blind all my life. Some of my earliest memories of going to church include the awkward whispers of neighbors who quietly asked my parents or grandparents if there might be any hope that I would see

someday. I wasn't ashamed of being blind, but I did often feel humiliated by the attitude of people who were whispering about me as though I weren't really there. Many people are so afraid of the dark they simply cannot get past the word "blind" to see a real person beyond the label.

Rev. Steele goes on with a reflection on the disciples' assumption that the man's blindness was some kind of curse or punishment for sin and that it is unfortunate the belief still exists in some form today. Jesus clearly rejected this myth in John 9:3, saying "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Some preachers interpret this to mean the man was born blind so that Jesus could come along and perform a miracle of all to see, but this interpretation robs the man of his humanity, reducing him to a mere prop in the story. Even the use of the word "healing" to describe this miracle implies that there was originally something "wrong" or "broken" about this man's blindness, which seems quite the opposite of what Jesus was saying in John 9:3. Although it's true that some people do not enjoy being blind—and I have to admit I myself find it annoying when it prevents me from doing useful things like driving a car—still, Jesus made it clear that blindness does not prevent us from doing God's will.

In ancient times, however, blindness did prevent people from entering most professions, and so the man in John 9 had been forced to spend his life as a beggar, merely surviving instead of living out a real vocation. Jesus changed all that by giving the man not only eyesight but also a sense of mission. After performing a fairly common ancient medical procedure with saliva and mud, Jesus directed the man to wash in the pool of Siloam, which we are told means "sent." From then on, the man was sent to witness to others that Jesus is sent from God.

As Rev. Steele shares: My Grandma Steel sent me to my own “pool of Siloam,” which took the form of the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind, a school in the Bronx which provided the best training blind children of the 1950s and ‘60s could receive. There I became proficient in reading and writing braille, I received a conservatory-level musical education, and I enjoyed being part of a community where I made many lifelong friendships. Nowadays, most blind kids go to public school and hopefully learn similar skills while being part of a diverse community in their own neighborhoods. For us, the word “healing” means a lifelong process of living out our vocation despite many of the same prevailing misconceptions the man in John 9 faced. “Healing” happens when we are loved and welcomed, when what we think and say and do matters.

How many times have we, when confronted with someone whose physical condition is outside what is considered normative, found ourselves wondering about how the person got that way? What did that man do that led to him being homeless and panhandling on the street? If I give him money, will he squander it on drugs or alcohol? Is he an addict? Is he mentally ill? What is wrong with that woman who collects disability checks each month? She looks perfectly able to work to me! Is she cheating the government so she can sit around and watch television all day? What about that young black man with the baggy pants who walks up and down the street all day long?. Why isn't he in school? Where are his parents? Is he in a gang? Is he selling drugs? Does he have a gun?

Communities form strong parameters around their identities. Once the boundaries that create clear insiders and outsiders are established, the only thing that remains is to make judgments about who is welcome and who is not. The criteria for making this judgment is often centered in blame:

- ~ That man is blind because he has sinned, so he can't be a member of our community.
- ~ That woman can't be the pastor in our community because her command of the English language is not good enough.
- ~ That child is not welcome in our worship services because he makes noise & runs around during church & his parents won't control him.

Here we see the community of Jesus' closest followers—his own disciples ---making assumptions about this man's condition. In doing so, they not only reject him themselves, but they give justification for the wider community to continue to reject him. He is blind because he or someone close to him has sinned. He deserves his punishment. The community does not have to nurture him because his blindness is his own fault. The community is free to ostracize him and deny him access to what those who have not committed the sin that leads to blindness take for granted, such as employment opportunities, a place to live, and friends and family who won't deny knowing him in order to protect their own privileged

The second community in this story is the neighbors from the village where the blind man was born, and where he and his family continue to live. Their response is curious: even though this is a man they have known all their lives, now that he can see, some of them can no longer recognize him, even after he repeatedly identifies himself to them. Once the Pharisees enter the picture, his own family won't speak on his behalf, for fear that they will be identified with the Jesus followers and ostracized by their community of faith.

Why are the neighbors unable to recognize this man once he is no longer disabled? Do we have difficulty accepting changes in people? Do we put them in a category that, once they are labeled, they can never escape? Or do

we believe that people really can change, be born again, made into new creatures? Do we believe that a person who has committed multiple heinous crimes can be forgiven, and even rehabilitated? Do we believe that a mother who has lost custody of her children because of addiction can ever be trusted with children again? Do we believe that someone who has hurt us can ever be worthy of our forgiveness?

It appears that like the community of disciples, the neighborhood community, and even the family, of the blind beggar also do nothing to nurture this man in his faith. Some don't even believe Jesus healed him. They don't believe he is the same man they have known all their lives. Others want to know how it is that he was healed, and where this miracle healer has gone. Surprisingly, not one of the man's lifelong neighbors celebrates this miracle, or cried tears of joy for his healing, or embraces him in love. At least, not according to John's account of the story.

The last community in the story is the small group of Pharisees. The Pharisees get stuck on a couple of issues. Some suggest Jesus cannot be a man from God if he broke the law and healed a man on the Sabbath. Not only is he a fraud, but he is a sinner just like the blind man. Others do not seem so hasty to make this judgement, so they continue to question the blind man. "What do you say about him?" And the healed man says he believes Jesus to be a prophet.

This response seems to really upset the Pharisaic community, to the point that they decide it must not be true that this man was born blind. Their judgment is that the whole story is a lie. So they go to question the man's parents.

The parents confirm that their son was born blind, and now can see, but they know nothing of how that came to be. The Gospel writer indicated that they then distance themselves from their son because they don't want to be associated

with the followers of Jesus. They are afraid this association will cause them to lose status in their community.

Meanwhile, the Pharisees, still not satisfied with the answers they have heard, return their attention to the fact that Jesus, by performing a work of healing on the Sabbath, is a sinner. The healing the man has received is not the work of Jesus: it is the work of God. They get into a back and forth with the healed man in an effort to pigeonhole him as a person who has chosen to give allegiance to a false prophet, a sinner who doesn't even observe the Sabbath. The blind man, despite being healed of his impairment, is in the end judged by the Pharisees to be an unrepentant sinner who continues to practice a sinful lifestyle. They refuse to honor his testimony. They reject that he has been healed of the sin that caused his blindness. They tell him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drive him out of town, banishing him from the only community he has ever known.

Jesus gets word of what has happened, seeks the man out, and invites him into the community of his disciples. And perhaps for the first time in his life, this man becomes part of a community that will actually nurture him in the faith.

Friends, this is another miracle in this story, because this is where our role as a community of faith in the baptismal covenant really gets some legs under it. Of course the restoration of sight to a man who has been blind his entire life is an incredible gift. But we can find real power in the story in that man—a man who had been born blind; who had been judged to be a sinner and rejected by his community, and even his own family, because of something that was beyond his control; who had suffered a lifetime of ostracism; and who had been reduced to earning a living by begging on the side of the road—found not just healing, but

grace, welcome, and even love, in the community of followers of Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me---

Oh, that our communities of faith could truly be places of this kind of welcome and nurture for all who pass through our doors. Open our eyes, Lord, to see people not with our own eyes, but with yours. Open our arms to welcome those who have been rejected or cast out by their communities and families. Open our hearts to be able to truly love those whom we have judged to be sinners. And help us, that by our teaching and example, those whom you sent to our communities maybe guided to accept God's grace for themselves, profess their faith openly, and lead Christian lives. Amen and amen.