

Title: The Miracle of Sight
Text: John 9:1-11
Date: September 28, 08
Immanuel Baptist Church
Chuck Queen, Pastor

The first thing we note in this story is that Jesus' disciples approach the blind man, not as a person to be pitied, but as an object of theological discussion. But their theology is askew. They assume that somebody sinned to cause this blindness. So their questioning begins on a faulty assumption. "Who sinned?" they want to know.

Before we come down too hard on them we would do well to reflect on how all of us are influenced and shaped by our culture. We are all children of our culture. The disciples are echoing cultural beliefs; we do the same thing. We believe things, not because we have carefully thought about them, not because we have studied, reflected, and critically assessed them but because we grew up with them or were taught them in our churches or by our parents or maybe it was simply the prevailing belief among our friends and peers. We are all children of our times, children of our culture.

Too much religious education today focuses on what to believe. My early Christian training involved indoctrination in what to believe. Some of that was good, some of it was just awful. Biases get passed down. We would do better if our Christian education consisted not in teaching people what to believe, but in teaching them how to think or even how to believe. I like the way theologian Peter Rollins redefines an orthodox Christian. He says a truly orthodox Christian is not one who believes all the right things, but one who believes in the right way—that is, believing in a loving, sacrificial, and Christlike manner.

I would suggest to you that our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ is not to guard the truth by trying to get others to conform to our statements of doctrine and our theological formulations. But our calling is to live the truth that is Christ which is love and compassion. Besides, we can never be sure that our version of the truth is the correct one anyway.

The man in our story who is healed goes through a series of interrogations. First, he is grilled by his neighbors. They are skeptical, and perhaps even agitated; they are a curious lot and we are not told why they have such a stake in this. Maybe it's because Jesus turned their faith upside down. They didn't have a neat, clearly defined theological category to put this in. So Jesus is upsetting their faith system. We all get a bit agitated when our faith system is challenged don't we?

So they call in the Pharisees and here's where it really heats up. Jesus did this on the Sabbath and these Pharisees see themselves as the guardians of Sabbath law; and Jesus' work of healing was a violation of Sabbath law.

Some of the Pharisees say, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But then others were not quite so sure, and they were divided. So they turned to the man who was healed and inquired: "What do you say about him." And he said, "He is a prophet."

Then the Pharisees question his parents. His parents play dumb, because they know that if they don't give them the answers they want they will make life hard for them, they could be "put out of the synagogue"—excommunicated from the social and religious life of their people. So they are very careful how they answer. They say, "We know he was born blind. But how he can now see, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." Of course, the Pharisees didn't like the answers the man was giving them, and they thought his parents might tell them what they wanted to hear.

You know, it's possible to give the correct answers and not really believe them. Lynna Williams, who teaches creative writing at Emory University, has written a short story about a twelve year old girl, who is the daughter of an evangelistic preacher, and she is compelled every summer to spend two weeks at a fundamentalist Bible camp for children in Oklahoma. During the day this camp is similar to all the other camps with hiking, softball, arts and crafts, and so forth. But at night they have a "revival meeting" where kids are pressed to surrender their lives to Jesus. The unwritten expectation is that at some time during the camp every camper will come forward and give a moving personal testimony.

The problem is that these campers are kids, most of them very normal kids, and so most of them don't have personal testimonies to give. That's where the twelve year old daughter comes in. She figured she could make a little money on the side as a ghostwriter for Jesus, writing personal testimonies for the other campers. For five dollars she wrote a wonderful personal testimony for a kid named Michael, about how in his old life he used to be very bad and would take the Lord's name in vain at football practice. But now that Jesus has come into his heart, his mouth is pure as a crystal spring.

This was good stuff, but her best piece of work was written for Tim Bailey. It was about how his life was so empty and meaningless until he met Jesus in an almost fatal, and utterly fictitious, pickup truck accident, a near catastrophe in which Jesus himself seized the steering wheel and averted disaster. That one took some imagination, and she charged twenty five dollars for it. A lot of the wit of Lynna Williams' short story comes from the fact that the satire is not too far from the truth.

This man in our story really did have a personal testimony, one that wasn't contrived at all. But the interesting thing is that his troubles didn't end when he met Jesus, that's when they began.

After the religious leaders finish with the parents, they bring back the man who was healed for a second go-around. Dogmatically they say, "Give glory to God and tell the truth. We know this man (meaning Jesus) is a sinner." The man says, "I don't know about whether he is a sinner or not, I just know that whereas I was blind, I now see."

So they ask him again: "How did he heal you? What did he do to you?" At this point the man reaches down and finds the courage he needs. He says: "I have told you already and you did not listen. (It was not what they wanted to hear). Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"

Well, that went over well. They hurl insults at him and say: "You are his disciple. We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't know where he comes from." The man responds: "This is remarkable! He opened my eyes and you don't know where he comes from. Nobody had ever heard of opening the eyes of a blind man. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." And they retort, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!"

Not only has his physical sight been restored, but in this interchange with the religious leaders it is obvious that he is gaining spiritual sight as well.

In May of 1968 two Roman Catholic priests, Daniel and Philip Berrigan (brothers), and seven of their Christian friends—two missionaries, a midwife, a nurse, a worker in race relations, and two others—walked into the draft board office in Catonsville, Maryland at the height of the Vietnam War. As an act of nonviolent protest and witness for peace, they took some draft files out of a filing cabinet, carried them out into the street, and burned them. They were, of course, arrested and charged with a federal crime.

In October of that year, they were placed on trial in federal court in the Baltimore. "Why did you do this?" said the prosecutor to Daniel Berrigan. "I did it," he said, "because I began to see the cost of being a Christian. When I saw the napalm kill children, my senses were invaded; and I saw the power of death in the modern world." At this point the judge interrupted: "Father Berrigan. This testimony is irrelevant. The war is not on trial, you are." "Your Honor," replied Daniel Berrigan, "I can only tell you what I see, and what I see is that right now we are standing before the living God." One of the attorneys said, "Mr. Berrigan, are you saying your religious convictions had something to do with this?" "Yes, yes, of course," responded Berrigan, "my religious convictions had something to do with this. If it were not for my religious convictions, this would be eviscerated of meaning; and I should be committed for insanity."

Another defendant, Mary Marlin, a nurse, stood up and said, “I did this because I have begun to see things as they are. This is what a Christian does when you see things.” She turned to the judge and said, “Your Honor, you stand well for the law, but what about God’s law of peace?” The judge puzzled over this a minute and then said, “Uh, I see your point,” then he hesitated and said, “but you are not my spiritual advisor.”

The religious leaders say to the man, “you are not our spiritual advisor. You were born in sin; how dare you teach us.” There is a kind of collision here of moral worlds. Dr. Thomas Long makes a very profound comment. He says: “The more we are drawn into the light of Jesus the more we have our eyes opened by the gospel. The more we have our eyes opened by the gospel, the more things we see, the more we see how the old world is captive to the powers of darkness and forces of death, the more ways we see that the shadows fall across us, across the world we assumed was so stable, and the less we can feel at ease in the world as it is. To be given sight by Jesus is to participate in the collision of moral worlds.”

It’s interesting, I think, how this man’s spiritual sight was clarified through the course of the conflict. Jesus doesn’t come to this man’s rescue in the heat of the interrogations. Maybe the interrogations were in some way necessary. Maybe the conflicts we encounter in some ways help to clarify things and enable us to see things more clearly.

Seeing is a process. My testimony is not, “I was blind, but now I see.” My testimony is more like, “Some days I’m still blind, but other days I see”; or “Some days I don’t see very clearly, but I’m learning how to see more clearly than before.” It’s a process, and sometimes it’s through conflict, especially conflict with the religious gatekeepers, that our vision is sharpened.

And the more we are drawn into the light of Christ, who is the light of the world, the less we can rest easy or feel comfortable in the world as it is, with all the injustice, prejudice, and greed that we see. And seeing such things in the world usually happens in proportion to our capacity to discern and see such things in our own hearts and lives. The evil in our world cuts through every human heart and individual life.

Seeing things and then speaking out about what you see will get you into trouble. It got this man kicked out of the synagogue. He was excommunicated from the social and religious life that centered around the synagogue. This sort of thing happens all the time when you talk about what you see.

It happens because there is a lot of “us” and “them” in society—and unfortunately, we probably find this duality of “us” and “them” more in religion than anywhere else (Christianity as much as any religion). I think Jesus tried to break down some of these

boundaries in his day, especially through his practice of an open table, where “sinners” and even tax collectors were welcome, but it only got him into more trouble.

John tells us that after they kicked him out of the synagogue Jesus finds him and says, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Who is he?” the man asks. Jesus says, “You have now seen him; he is the one talking to you.” And the man says, “I believe.” Sometimes that’s where we have to be before we can see, before Jesus can find us and before we can trust Jesus’ vision and dream for the world.

I could tell you today that when you start to see, everything will be just wonderful, but it would be a lie; like the girl in the short story I would be giving a false testimony. In reality that’s usually when the trouble begins, when you start to see. As Thomas Long says, when you start to see “a collision of moral worlds” occurs. You can’t rest easy when you see injustice or when you see how religion is used to advance the agenda of the ones in power or when you see how the radical Jesus is Americanized and made into something he never was; when you start to see these things you have to say something, you have to speak out. Once you can see, life will never be comfortable again.

Lord, even as we talk about “seeing” we have to confess that in so many areas of life we are still blind and we need the light that is in Jesus, the true light of the world, to illuminate and expose our blindness. May we not fear the conflict, may we not be timid when we are questioned by the powers that be, but give us courage to proclaim what we see. In the name of Jesus. Amen.