First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

3/19/23

Before and After

John 9:1-34

**9**As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. **2**His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” **3**Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. **4**We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. **5**As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” **6**When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, **7**saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. **8**The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” **9**Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am he.” **10**But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” **11**He answered, “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.”**12**They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.” **13**They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. **14**Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. **15**Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” **16**Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” Others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. **17**So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”**18**The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight **19**and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” **20**His parents answered, “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, **21**but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” **22**His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus[c] to be the Messiah[d] would be put out of the synagogue. **23**Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” **24**So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” **25**He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” **26**They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” **27**He answered them, “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?” **28**Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. **29**We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” **30**The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. **31**We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. **32**Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. **33**If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” **34**They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

In the lectionary, this week’s reading ends at verse 11 and you’ll noticed I went well beyond that this morning. I’ve never quite figured out why the folks who put the lectionary together made some of the choices they made as, more often than not, they split the readings up in such a way that leaves out some pretty important stuff.

Fortunately, I’m not required to follow the lectionary, exactly, and I’m grateful for the freedom this offers me to either expand on an assigned passage, or to ignore it entirely, if the Spirit moves me to do so. This week, I chose to expand on where the lectionary takes us, because there’s some interesting stuff that got left out.

There are some things about this event, which are worth mentioning; things that make this story unique. First of all, Jesus is actually a somewhat minor player, in this drama. The focus is almost entirely on the man who had been blind from birth. And what John does, here, is to pull back the curtain on what happens after Jesus does his thing and moves on. The second thing that caught my eye is that the blind man never asked to be healed. Jesus heals him without being requested to do so. Then there’s the *way* Jesus chose to heal this man. Kind of icky, to be honest. And also, completely unnecessary, as Jesus has the ability to heal without physically touching anyone, which we know from reading Luke’s account of the healing of the 10 Lepers, which is only one example.

Now one way to preach this text, is to focus on an interpretation of the word “blindness,” to mean a sort of spiritual blindness, or disease, which is only cured when we, allow Jesus into our lives, as the result of some life-changing event. Or, to put it another way, we’re only cured when our eyes are opened and we experience a “I’ve seen the light moment.” And that’s certainly a valid way to work with this passage. But, given the fact that John lets us in on what happens after this man receives his sight, I want to focus in a slightly different direction.

One of the more remarkable aspects of this reading is that John is giving us a chance to see the reaction of the Pharisees to Jesus’ ministry, in real time. We know, of course, that the Pharisees were opposed to everything Jesus was doing, but here, we see some cracks in the united front presented by the religious authorities.

So, Jesus rubbed some mud on this guy’s eyes and told him to go wash at the pool of Siloam. Our unnamed hero goes and does what Jesus tells him to do because well, why not? He doesn’t have anything to lose. When he comes back, Jesus is gone. The crowd struggles to understand what’s happened and so they take him to the Pharisees to try and figure it out.

The Pharisees are just as perplexed as the crowd. And verse 16, tells us, *"****16****Some of the Pharisees said,” “This man* (meaning Jesus) *is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” Others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” “And they were divided.”*

Now, everyone could see that this man, who was a fixture in the community; this person who had lived in their village all of his life, someone they *knew* had been blind from birth, was suddenly healed.

But, some of the religious leaders just couldn’t accept it. They couldn’t, or perhaps wouldn’t, believe what they saw with their own eyes. So, some of them, in an attempt to deny what was happening, defaulted to the fact that this miracle occurred on the Sabbath. This man couldn’t be from God because he doesn’t observe the Sabbath. Others were not so sure; how could a sinner do such things?

As the story progresses, the Pharisees frustration becomes more and more apparent. They repeatedly question the man, they badger his parents and, in the end, the faction that couldn’t, or wouldn’t, believe what they saw with their own eyes, has gained the upper hand. “Give glory to God,” they tell the man, “we know he is a sinner.” I imagine our hero is getting a bit frustrated, at this point, because he tells them, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” It’s still not enough, because again they ask the man, “What did he do?” “How did he open your eyes?” In verse 27, we hear our hero’s frustration boil over, ***27****He answered them, “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?”* The man’s testimony continues in verse 31, where he says, *“****31****We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.* ***32****Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.* ***33****If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”* Talk about speaking truth to power! And we know that his insistence on speaking an inconvenient truth, got our hero kicked out of his faith community.

So, who are we, in this story? Are we like that faction of the Pharisees, who see with their own eyes, the workings of God, and yet remain blind? Or are we like those Pharisees who say, “Huh, what do you know?” “Seems like God might be at work, here, maybe we should pay attention.” Or are we like the blind man who listens and obeys and, as a result, has his entire life transformed.

If I’m being honest with myself, and with you, I have to admit that at various times, I see myself in all three of these scenarios. There are times when I don’t want to accept the fact that God is working in and through the lives of those I struggle to love. I see it, but I don’t want to admit that God could possibly use “those people,” to further the work of the Kingdom. There are times when I have to admit that maybe, just maybe, God is at work and perhaps I need to pay attention. And there are times when I am so convinced of God’s truth, that I can do nothing but speak truth to power, no matter the cost. I imagine I’m not alone in seeing myself in all three of these situations. I think we’d all like to see ourselves as the blind man, suddenly healed of our spiritual blindness, and I think none of us want to see ourselves as people who remain blind to the truth, even when it’s obvious.

So, what do we do? Maybe, the answer lies in the reaction of that small faction of Pharisees who were open to the possibility that their beliefs might need some adjustment. Maybe, just maybe, our hero’s story tells us that God was at work in the hearts and minds of these learned, righteous, religious leaders. And what might the outcome have been if this group of Pharisees, had prevailed? Unfortunately, we’ll never know what could have been, because it seems that those who could see, and refused to see, ultimately won out.

If there’s one thing I hope you take away from the message this morning, it’s this: Being willing to rethink long held assumptions and beliefs is God at work in you.

How different might our individual faith journeys be, if we open ourselves up to new ways of seeing God at work in the lives of those around us, in our own lives, or even in the life of our faith communities?

Folks, I encourage you to take a good hard look at your beliefs and assumptions. I pray that God will work new things in and through you. I pray that you’ll be open to the Spirit, and most of all, I pray that you will not remain blind when God has given you your sight. AMEN