

One Thing I Do Know  
Sunday, March 30, 2014  
Lent 4A  
John 9:1-41  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church  
Elizabeth Mangham Lott

This is the fourth Sunday of the season of Lent. For some of us, the period of the Christian calendar has long been a part of our personal faith practice. For others, Lent is either relatively new to you personally or set aside as part of other faith expressions.

For those Baptists who embrace the weeks of Lent, we do not view this time as an effort to gain God's grace. Rather, these weeks invite us to examine our lives that our faith and our steps better synch up. We give attention to this effort in the days leading to Easter because we hope that our efforts build with every year—Lent becomes part of our habits, and the lessons become part of our lives.

Writer, preacher Frederick Buechner welcomes this season, saying, "During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves."<sup>1</sup>

And so it is that we have faced scripture texts that invite us to enter a season of wilderness, to consider what we hold dear from scripture, to hear the call on our lives to follow God's leading, to remember the blessing God has poured over us, to draw near one another at the source of life and truth.

This morning brings us one week closer to understanding more of this Way that Jesus continues to invite us into. We come again to a robust passage in John's gospel, 9:1-41. In the verses immediately preceding this passage, Jesus has been arguing with religious leaders in the temple about sin, truth, and God's will. The leaders are furious, and that is where our scene today begins.

John 8:59-John 9:41 (NRSV and The Message)

8:59 So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

1-2 Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?"

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*, p. 82

**3-5** Jesus said, “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world’s Light.”

**6-7** He said this and then spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man’s eyes, and said, “Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam” (Siloam means “Sent”). The man went and washed—and saw.

**8** Soon the town was buzzing. His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were saying, “Why, isn’t this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?”

**9** Others said, “It’s him all right!”

But others objected, “It’s not the same man at all. It just looks like him.”

He said, “It’s me, the very one.”

**10** They said, “How did your eyes get opened?”

**11** “A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ I did what he said. When I washed, I saw.”

**12** “So where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

**13-15** They marched the man to the Pharisees. This day when Jesus made the paste and healed his blindness was the Sabbath. The Pharisees grilled him again on how he had come to see. He said, “He put a clay paste on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see.”

**16** Some of the Pharisees said, “Obviously, this man can’t be from God. He doesn’t keep the Sabbath.”

Others countered, “How can a bad man do miraculous, God-revealing things like this?” There was a split in their ranks.

**17** They came back at the blind man, “You’re the expert. He opened *your* eyes. What do you say about him?”

He said, “He is a prophet.”

**18-19** The [religious leaders] didn’t believe it, didn’t believe the man was blind to begin with. So they called the parents of the man now bright-eyed with sight. They asked them, “Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? So how is it that he now sees?”

**20-23** His parents said, “We know he is our son, and we know he was born blind. But we don’t know how he came to see—haven’t a clue about who opened his eyes. Why don’t you ask him? He’s a grown man and can speak for himself.” (His parents were talking like this because they were intimidated by the [religious] leaders, who had already decided that anyone who took a stand that this was the Messiah would be kicked out of the meeting place. That’s why his parents said, “Ask him. He’s a grown man.”)

**24** They called the man back a second time—the man who had been blind—and told him, “Give credit to God. We know this man is an impostor.”

**25** He replied, “I know nothing about that one way or the other. But one thing I do know: I was blind . . . I now see.”

**26** They said, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

**27** “I’ve told you over and over and you haven’t listened. Why do you want to hear it again? Are you so eager to become his disciples?”

**28-29** With that they jumped all over him. “*You* might be a disciple of that man, but we’re disciples of Moses. We know for sure that God spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this man even comes from.”

**30-33** The man replied, “This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! It’s well known that God isn’t at the beck and call of sinners, but listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence and does his will. That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn’t come from God, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

**34** They said, “You’re nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!” Then they threw him out in the street.

35 Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him. He asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

36 The man said, "Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him."

37 Jesus said, "You're looking right at him. Don't you recognize my voice?"

38 "Master, I believe," the man said, and worshiped him.

39 Jesus then said, "I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind."

40 Some Pharisees overheard him and said, "Does that mean you're calling us blind?"

41 Jesus said, "If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you're accountable for every fault and failure."

May God bless the reading and the hearing of this word.

Like many biblical passages, the details of this gospel text today may seem very antiquated to us. A short, two verse healing of a man born blind turns into 39 verses of debate over what has just happened. Was sin present before the child was born, thereby creating the birth condition of blindness? Is Jesus guilty of the sin of healing a person in need on the Sabbath? Can God be at work in places we do not expect? They all go round and round, and the end result is drawing sharp dividing lines between people who believe different things about God and different things about how that belief is to be lived out. Maybe it's not so antiquated at that point.

James Alison says that we see "a revolution in the understanding of sin" in this story.<sup>2</sup> He writes, "at the beginning of the tale, sin was considered in terms of some sort of defect that excludes the one bearing the defect. At the end of the tale sin is considered as the act of exclusion: the real blindness is the blindness which is not only present in those who exclude, but actually grows and intensifies during the act of exclusion."

That is when this text comes alive in our time. Ours is a culture every bit as obsessed with the idea of sin as the faith leaders in John 9—everyone else's, that is—while largely

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<sup>2</sup> [http://girardianlectionary.net/res/jbw\\_4b\\_john9.htm](http://girardianlectionary.net/res/jbw_4b_john9.htm)

unwilling to invest in serious self-examination and truth telling about our own...much less considering what biblical definitions of sin look like in the first place.

People are terrified of being on God's bad side, and we see that playing out throughout the religious landscape around us today. Gerard Sloyan, a professor of religion and Johannine scholar, warns, "A theology of paranoia, a church with an 'enemies list,' is fraught with peril."<sup>3</sup>

John's reading before us this morning comes out of a context when 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish leaders and Jewish Christian disciples were at an impasse. The questions being asked in this passage quickly moves from the root origins of sin and Jesus' status as a sinner healing on the Sabbath to the question of where does God's blessing lie. Is God's blessing and presence only in one place with one group? Are the signs of God's blessing right practice and fidelity to a prescribed way of faith? Or does God move beyond the boundary lines we humans draw? Does God's spirit still hover and create? Does God's light really shine in the darkest of places? The panic comes when we try to give the "right" answer, as we perceive it, rather than speaking from the truth of our experience.

We sit with these questions, like the man born blind, and we admit, "I don't know about all of that. I don't need to get in this fight about being right or wrong. I can't guarantee I know about the mysterious ways of God. But one thing I do know...I was blind and now I see."

At the end of this 41 verse story, the two groups don't make peace and agree to disagree for the sake of harmony and unity. There is a split in community, and it's sad. Fellowship is broken between two devout, sincere religious groups who believe differently enough that they can't find a way forward together any longer.

Beyond the walls of this congregation, looking at "the" church as we know it in the United States, I believe our religious climate today is just as divided as the scene before us from the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Religious culture today is even more contentious than our American political climate, just less visible.

Angry barbs are thrown about between political groups: socialist, nazi, idiot, selfish, greedy, liar. The barbs in Christian attacks replace all of those other terms with heavy applications of sin, sinner, hell, and unChristian. Certain religious leaders today wish to determine what they deem unforgivable sin and draw the lines so deeply they are quick to cast many out of the church.

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<sup>3</sup> Gerard Sloyan, *Interpretation: John*, p. 124

I have been grieved by American church life this week as I followed the story of World Vision's announcement and retraction of a policy change for the U.S. office of that international aid organization. World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. Their vision is "for every child, life in all its fullness; for every heart, the will to make it so." They feed, they work for clean water, they respond to natural disasters, and they focus on the needs of the poor. Last week, World Vision's U.S. board of directors and executive director announced that they were adjusting their hiring practices for the headquarter offices and would acknowledge same sex marriages.

Immediately, there was outrage.

In one day, 5000 children—real children with names who wrote letters to families in the United States and who anticipated receiving letters back were dropped because people in this country were more afraid of what they perceived to be the letter of the law than the good news for a world in need. Out of fear and absolute panic that they might be marked as unclean, people rapidly dropped support for the basic needs of 5000 of the world's poor. American Christians chose to leave thousands of the world's most vulnerable without the basic needs their privilege was providing all because they are terrified of how they understand sin. And if *that* isn't sin, I'm just not sure I know what is.

World Vision reversed the change in its hiring policy within 24 hours, and so far the only staff to quit their jobs with the organization have all been workers in the call center who could not handle the constant messages of hate and anger being spewed through the phone lines.<sup>4</sup>

We've reached a crossroads in the American religious landscape. There are moments when professing Christians are more concerned about the details of sin on the sabbath than the good news that a man who was blind can now see. We do not have to agree on the details of every part of Christian tradition, and we acknowledge here every week that within these walls we don't agree about all things, but we must find a way to bless and agree and celebrate the good news of our encounters with Jesus Christ. We must loosen our white knuckle grip on "Truth" and trust that God is fully capable of taking care of the things we do not understand. Together, we must confess, "I don't know that

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Richard Stearns, ED of World Vision: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/28/rich-stearns-gay-marriage\\_n\\_5049736.html?ncid=fbklnkushpimg00000051](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/28/rich-stearns-gay-marriage_n_5049736.html?ncid=fbklnkushpimg00000051)

I can make sense of all the details sitting before me, but one thing I do know...I was blind and now I see.”

Like I said, the attention around these religious issues is typically much smaller than anything picked up in political headlines. Much of the arguing, discussing, and thoughtfully considering is happening online through social media and blogging. To the present impasse in North American Christian life, Blogger Sarah Bessey writes, “I’m someone who believes that we are in the midst of major shift within the Church – what Phyllis Tickle calls a “rummage sale” – similar to the Great Schism, and the Reformation. **The Church is sorting and casting off, renewing and re-establishing in the postmodern age and this is a good thing.** The old will remain – it always does – but something new is being born, too. If it is being born in the Church, it is first being born in the hearts and minds and lives of us, the Body.”<sup>5</sup>

If that sounds terrifying to some who have been raised in the tradition now being sorted and renewed, Bessey reminds, “**We are a resurrection people, darling.** God can take our death and ugliness and bitterness, our hurt and our wounds, and make something beautiful and redemptive. For you. In you. With you.”

When we are being true to what we have seen in Christ, when we are being faithful to our experience of God’s light in the world, there may be times when others walk away from us because they disagree. We’re too easy going when it comes to sin, too foolishly generous when it comes to doling out news of God’s grace, they will say.

We have to find a way forward. Don’t let me lose you today thinking that I am talking about one argument or one divisive issue. The cost is too high for me to be unclear about this: if we want to participate in God’s abundant generosity, if we want to practice the ways of God’s kingdom here on earth, if we want to bless the world in Jesus’ name, then we have to commit ourselves to working together even when we fiercely disagree. We must embrace a way of humility embodied by John’s story of the man born blind, “I don’t know about all of the inner workings of God’s ways, but one thing I do know...”

In the same week that the World Vision drama shook the blogosphere, the mainstream headlines and news networks picked up a better story as Pope Francis surprised the world again by choosing to become the first pope to confess his sins before watching eyes. Pope Francis was about to sit and receive confessions from those present in Friday’s penitential liturgy, but first he turned and knelt before a priest and whispered

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Bessey blog: <http://sarahbessey.com/ones-leaving-evangelicalism/>

the truth about his life—who knows what he may have shared, but in that moment he named his shortcomings and failings as a congregation watched, then he rose and welcomed them to come and do the same.

The turning point of the blind man's story may be when he receives his sight. It may also be, however, when he confesses his faith in Jesus as the source of true vision. We have felt blind in our lives. We have experienced a sense of new sight, new life, and a new chance to be the persons we have been called to be.<sup>6</sup>

We must continually repeat this process. "It is the little blindnesses that cry out for examination, and these should be fearlessly explored," writes Gerard Sloyan.<sup>7</sup>

What do we need to confess and shed from our lives?

To what are we blind?

How have we failed to tell the story of God's grace in our lives?

How have we failed to extend that same grace to others?

When has our ego and fear prevented us from honoring God?

Where do we read ourselves in this story: the religious leaders who are casting out what they do not understand, the man who was healed only to be swiftly cut off from religious community, or Jesus who hears the news that the man was cast out and immediately goes to be with him?

We consider this morning the time when we need to let go and say with boldness, "I understand so little, but one thing I do know..."

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<sup>6</sup> Inspired by David Lose, Working Preacher.

<sup>7</sup> Gerard Sloyan, *Interpretation: John*, p. 123