

We See

John 9:1-41

March 26, 2017

It's bad enough being a kid and having your mother give you a spit bath, but to be an adult, and have some complete stranger wipe their spit on your face, well, that's just going a bit too far! And it wasn't just spit, but spit mixed with dirt to make mud! What was Jesus thinking! And the man hadn't even asked for help, or asked to be healed!

This story today is especially intriguing. In so many ways, it is a hilarious depiction of what happens to a community when change is introduced. And it is a story of no one acting as we would expect. (Deborah J. Kapp, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, p. 118) Jesus and his disciples notice the man and have a conversation about the cause of this man's blindness—it is not because of sin. This is important, because there was the prevailing belief that if someone was blind, or sick, or there was something else “wrong”, it was due to sin, either the parents' sin, or the person's sin, perhaps sin committed in utero, if they were born with it. Verses 3-4, while making it clear that sin was not the cause of his blindness, also seem to indicate that the man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. However, the phrase, “he was born blind” is actually not in the Greek text at all. A better translation of these 2 verses is: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But so that God's works might be revealed in him, we must work the works of God who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.” The man is blind. God's work is to bring healing, so that is what Jesus is going to do.

In order to do the healing work of God, Jesus then spits in the dirt, makes mud, wipes it on the man's eyes, and then tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. Upon doing so, the man sees. The one who had been blind from birth now has his sight. What is funny is that now that this man can see, his neighbours don't recognize him. What is that about?! Shouldn't he be the one who doesn't recognize them? After all, he's the one who has never set eyes on them, but they have seen him every day in the community, interacting with them. How is it that they do not recognize him? Have they only ever seen him as the Man Born Blind, that they don't recognize him as the Man Who Sees? Did they only ever see his blindness, but not the shape of his face, the colour of his hair, his height, his gait? Had they never had a conversation with him about his hopes and dreams, about

what he thought about the current political situation, about what it is that brought him deep joy? How do you not recognize someone because he now has his sight? Was his blindness all that defined him, and now that it is gone, he's not the same person?

And they keep talking amongst themselves: "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" And he has to keep saying, "It's me!" "Yes, I'm the man." "Yo, over here; it's me!" And they keep asking him how, then, he can see. It's like he gained his sight, and they lost not only their sight, but their ability to comprehend the answers to their questions. This man who now sees answers their questions, explaining that "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." His neighbours want to find Jesus, but the man doesn't know where he is.

This man has not yet set eyes on Jesus. Jesus has seen him, healed him, but by the time the man has his sight, Jesus is gone. So the neighbours take the man to the Pharisees for it was the Sabbath day when Jesus gave him his sight. Again, the man who now sees is asked questions by the Pharisees about what happened. Again, the man tells them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some Pharisees think 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?" The Pharisees don't agree, so they ask the man what he thinks, "It was your eyes he opened. What do you say?" And the man who now sees replies, "He is a prophet."

With these words, the debate continues, only now it is about whether this man really had been blind and had now received his sight. So they call his parents to confirm that he really is their son, and really had been blind and how it is that he now sees. They reply, "We know this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that he now sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him, he is of age. He will speak for himself." The text then tells us that they were afraid of the religious leaders who had said that anyone who confessed that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. To confess Jesus as Messiah was to be banished from the community. His parents were afraid of this, so, instead of speaking on behalf of their son, they leave him to speak for himself. Remember, I said no one acts as we expect in this story. These parents do not act as we expect parents to act. Rather than standing with their son, they seem to cower behind him.

And again, the man who now sees is called upon to answer more questions. This time, the religious leaders declare to the man that Jesus is a sinner. The man replies, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They ask him again how it was that Jesus healed him, and he replies, somewhat exasperated now, I imagine, "I have already told you and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Unless it's because you also want to become his disciples?"

Then begins a conversation about being a disciple of Moses: "You are Jesus' disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, Jesus, we do not know where he comes from." The man, emboldened, astounded, flabbergasted, answered, "This is astonishing! You don't know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but to those who worship and obey God. 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." And with those words, the religious leaders dismissed him as a sinner, and drove him out of the synagogue.

When confronted with something they didn't understand, something that didn't fit into their idea of religion, of what was possible, of what was true and right, the religious leaders separated themselves from the one who was different.

For the second time in the story, Jesus sees this man. Jesus, after hearing that he had been driven out of the synagogue, seeks him out and engages him in conversation: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man who now sees answered, "And who is he? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus replies, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." The man replies, "I believe."

It seems so simple on the part of this man who was born blind and who now sees. He didn't ask for healing, and yet Jesus saw him, put mud on his eyes, sent him to the pool of Siloam, told him to wash, and he could see. Now, standing before him is the man who healed him, but a man he doesn't recognize by sight because he has never laid eyes on him. But he recognizes him by his words and his voice. He responds to this voice, as a sheep responds to the shepherd, trusting that what is spoken is true, trusting in the one who sees him to also restore him.

While our reading ended this morning at 9:41, Jesus doesn't stop speaking until 10:21. In many ways, this story is not complete unless we also include Jesus' conversation about the sheep knowing the voice of the shepherd. It is those who hear the voice of the good shepherd and enter by the gate who are disciples of Jesus. The good shepherd knows the sheep, and the sheep know the good shepherd. They follow the good shepherd, because they recognize the voice.

This man who was born blind embodies the sheep who follow the good shepherd based on the sound of his voice. Responding only to Jesus' words, this man trusted and did what Jesus asked him. And in doing so, he was given physical sight, and spiritual sight—belief.

The work of healing is messy work. It involves our bodies and it involves dirt, the stuff of life. It is the mixture of body and earth that produces the healing mud of God's healing works. There is no other way to participate in the works of God than to invest our bodies and get our hands dirty. It is messy work; it is holy work. And it involves making sure our sight is clear, so we can see those Jesus sees. And it will not be understood by others around us.

Just as Jesus saw this man who was blind from birth, so Jesus sees us, and touches us with holy spit and earthiness, calls us to wash the mud away, and transforms the muck of our lives into new sight and new understanding. Receiving Jesus' healing love gives us confidence to proclaim what we know, "I once was blind, but now I see." Thanks be to God!

We don't have mud to anoint you this morning. But we do have gold, a metal found in the earth! Everyone is invited to come forward for anointing with gold, as a symbol of being seen by God, and of our willingness to have God transform the muddiness of our lives into new sight and new understanding. God sees us, notices our wounds before we even speak, and offers us fullness of life. Receive this anointing as your act of trust in the God who sees, knows, heals and loves.

Our song of response, *Open my Eyes*, is our prayer for this kind of sight. You are invited to come forward after the song. Elisabeth, Lois and Julian will be singing during the anointing. The song they are singing is on the screen, and you are welcome to join them as you wish.