

**March 22, 2020 Finding God's Perspective John 9:1-41 Caledon East United Church Rev. Ross Leckie**

Listening to the CBC on the way home a while ago, I heard this story. A woman who described herself as an unquestioning secularist was moved by a journalist's sense of curiosity to walk through the open doors of a church one Sunday morning. She went, along with everyone else, up to the communion rail and had an epiphany of a God who wasn't just up there, out there but who was within that very earthy chunk of bread. She left, as she said, not believing that Jesus lived but knowing it. That was how her faith journey began, at the age of 45. She didn't ask for it, it happened. She has become active in the life of that church and, in her words, is still in the process of being converted.

In our story for today, Jesus encounters a man born blind. The religious establishment had all sorts of explanations for his blindness. He is a sinner. His parents sinned. Someone must have done something to cause this. Don't we seek such answers in our own modern way? It's genetic. There was some problem at birth. He was given too much oxygen. (That can cause blindness; I learned that in the ICU with our grandson). The man must have had an infection that wasn't properly treated. Jesus said, "No, it is no one's fault but through this blindness, not every blindness, but through this blindness, God's works will be seen." Unfortunately, no one seemed to want to notice and give thanks. The neighbours wouldn't believe. Some decided that it was a case of mistaken identity. "No way could that blind man be healed, it must be someone who looks like him." The Pharisees turned it into a theological argument, "Whatever happened wasn't the work of God. There is a law against working on the Sabbath." Even his parents had trouble resisting the pull of conventional wisdom. "Yes, we admit that this is our son, but as for his healing, well, we don't know about that. You'd better ask him."

The woman who entered the open doors of the church wasn't particularly looking for a spiritual experience. She was just curious. The blind man wasn't looking to be healed. He wasn't even sure who it was who healed him. "Some man named Jesus put some mud in my eyes and told me to go and wash it off in the pool of Siloam. So I did. Don't ask me where he is now. I don't even know what he looks like." The man just did what he was told but after the fact he concluded that whoever healed him was someone special. In his telling of the story to the Pharisees, he claimed, "He's a prophet." By the second time he told the story to the religious leaders, he was more confident. "Well think about it. If this man were not from God, could he have opened my eyes, could he have done anything remotely like that? I was blind, now I see. That's a good thing. Don't you think God might be involved in that?" "Who are you to try to teach us!?" was their response and they drove him out of the synagogue. Even later, when talking to Jesus, he confessed, "Lord, I believe in you."

The Gospel of John is a bit hard to get your head around. The ancient theologian Chrysostom in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century had a hard time making sense of Jesus' sometimes obscure, mixed metaphors. He said, "Now it was for this reason that Christ often spoke obscurely, because he wished to make his hearers more inclined to ask questions and to cause them to be more attentive. What has been said with its meaning obviously often escapes the listener, but what has been said obscurely makes him or her more curious and eager." I think that means that if the Bible doesn't always make sense, that is not a bad thing. It encourages us to question and to think. If my sermons seem a bit obtuse, I'm in good company!

Jesus says in the conclusion to the story, "I came into the world for judgment so that those who cannot see could see and those who see may become blind." With the Pharisees, I'm confused. Am I one of the ones who was blind and can see now or am I blind now because I was so sure of my sight before? Jesus goes on, "If you were blind, you would not have sin, but now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." With the Pharisees, I'm confused. Am I blind and sinless or clear-sighted and still living in sin? Am I supposed to be blind? Is it ever OK to lay claim to sight?

Jesus doesn't stop talking at the end of chapter. The people who put the chapters into the Bible in the 13<sup>th</sup> century thought that the story was long enough. Reading it today, you probably agree with them. But Jesus kept talking. He went on to talk about being the good shepherd and knowing his sheep, calling them by name, caring for them and searching out sheep who belong to different folds. Jesus said that this story is really about who is in and who is out. About who gets to decide where God is active and what God is doing. We who are a part of the church, who have always been in the church like to think that God is active in and through the church. We want the church to have the monopoly on God's activity because we don't know how to connect to it otherwise. We want other people, young people to join us in the church because that would confirm for us our hold on God. We are the ones who have seen the light, right? If only others would join us. Oops. Those that see are the ones whom Jesus condemns.

Before that woman entered the open doors of the church, she had a way of seeing the world that made sense to her, that was confirmed by everyone she knew and everything she did. But then she met Jesus and she realized that she was blind and now she sees or at least she is beginning to see. She sees the world differently, she sees her life differently. I am afraid that those of us, and I include myself in this, those of us who have always been in the church, have managed to fuse together a version of the gospel that doesn't really challenge the modern world in which we live. Our conversion is rather stilted because we have always tamed the gospel to fit into the wider culture. We think we get it, but we don't. We think we see, but "it is for judgment that Jesus came into the world, to give sight to those who were blind and to make blind those who see. If you were blind, you would not be guilty (there would still be the hope of your conversion,) but because you claim to see, your guilt remains." We need to admit to our blindness and let the gospel open our eyes to a new way of seeing.

David Guiliano, a former moderator wrote in a United Church Observer article an apology to all those young people who were raised in the church but who now no longer attend. He writes, "I am sorry that the Jesus we served up at pot luck suppers was so bland. That the God you met at Vacation Bible School was so compromised by our middle class morality. That the Holy Spirit we preached was so domesticated. I am sorry we talked about prayer and social justice and forgiveness more than we lived them." I would also add that I am sorry that you were introduced to leaders in the church whose lives demonstrated hypocrisy rather than faithfulness and self-centredness rather than servanthood.

It has been gratifying to see the response of some people during this time of crisis that we are experiencing as we take direction from health authorities to avoid 'spreading' the coronavirus. I've heard that despite very busy grocery stores, people are being more patient and courteous than usual. I've heard about those who have asked their neighbours if they can pick up something for those who are particularly vulnerable or 'self-isolating.' I've seen more young families out and about our neighbourhood, walking and cycling than usual. I heard of a situation where bystanders rushed to the side of a woman who had suddenly fallen to the ground. She said, "I'm sorry I've just been experiencing some severe leg cramps. I thank you and if we were not concerned about this virus, I'd give you a hug, but I'm ok."

It appears that the young man born blind was known only by his characteristic of being blind. Once he was healed, no one recognized him. It appears that no one really had gotten to know him as a unique 'child of God.' The authorities no longer recognized him and even denied that this could be the person they had known as the one blind from birth. In these days when we are being asked to do things differently, to perhaps slow down and be intentional about our interactions, could we take a closer attention to who people are? Could God be calling us to do these very things? Paying attention, offering ourselves, being vigilant yet vulnerable at the same time? Could we act out of God's perspective?

There is lots of evidence that the young people we raised in the church are living out their Christian faith outside of the church. They are protesting and marching, participating in internet campaigns and boycotts, they are buying bus passes and shopping at second hand stores, they are informed and involved but they are not in the church. Maybe it is time that we went and joined them instead of always waiting for them to come back and join us. But that is only part of the solution. The changes that they will need to make in this world need the foundation of faith. Even though we are somewhat blind, still in the process of being converted, we can share the gospel we know and the love we have received. The world needs the church, and even more so, needs Christ. God is calling us to action that is undergirded with faith. What we have received—the stories of the Bible, our faith, our faith community, even our church building—is a rich heritage that has been entrusted to us. May we have the sight, the insight to be worthy of that trust, and faithful to our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Beth Scibienski, *A Thousand Words of Inspiration*, 2014.

George W. Stroup and Deborah J. Kapp in *Feasting on the Word*

Michael E. Williams *Storytellers Companion to the Bible: John*