

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
A Little Mud and a lot of Light
(John 9)

Judge or Savior

How do we see God? If you were to close your eyes and to think back of your earliest impressions of God, what might they be? I think it's probably true that it really doesn't matter much what was taught to you the most but it's more, what stuck with you?

For some of us it might be God as judge, and not just a kindly judge with homely glasses, looking out for your best, but instead, a judge breathing fire and damnation. Or maybe what comes to your mind is a far gentler image, God as love, caregiver, friend, and healer.

I was reminded of one of my earliest impressions, one that stuck with me, at the chapel over at Palm Village where we had the memorial service on Thursday for Winona's mom. There at the front was a stain glass image of Jesus the good shepherd. He's tenderly holding a sheep in his arms. I believe there's a similar picture at Sierra View Homes. I probably first saw this picture as a child on a flannel graph in a Sunday school room. Or maybe it was in a children's story book. For whatever reason, it stuck with me. This is what God is like to me. Caring, loving, healing, saving....far more than judging. Jesus as Savior, far more than Jesus as Judge.

John 9

The gospel according to St. John contains a series of Jesus stories told only in John's gospel. Jesus' conversation with his late night visitor Nicodemus in chapter 3. His interaction with the Samaritan woman beside the well in John 4. And now this story of healing as Jesus rescues a blind man from his lifetime of living in darkness. Of course our attention in John 9 is always drawn to the improbable image of Jesus spitting in the ground, creating a little splotch of mud, applying it to the man's eyes, and then telling him to go wash up in a nearby pool of water.

But there's much more to the text than just this startling, over-the-top opening act. The scene begins in the neighborhood where the man lives and is known. Here the blind man meets Jesus. It shifts to a conversation, a bit of an inquisition, between the (formerly) blind man and the Pharisees. Then another conversation between the Pharisees and the man's parents. The fourth act resembles the second; the Pharisees once again deal with the man. And then in the last scene Jesus reappears, interacting with the man one final time, as well as with the Pharisees. You can see there's symmetry to the passage.

There's a lot going on here. Three times the nameless man is asked what happened. First by the neighbors, then the Pharisees twice. He responds to both but fends off the second request for details from the Pharisees. There's the interplay of light and dark. Dark, gritty mud becomes an instrument of clarity and light. Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." The man has lived under a shroud of darkness because of his blindness. But then he sees, absorbing light. The metaphor is played with. Is it possible to literally see but still be blind?

And of course, the text has a lot to do with sin. We don't, these days, like to talk too much about sin. It's such a blunt, ugly word. But here it steps onto center stage. This is where the story begins. A poor, marginalized man, down-and-out because of his blindness, by accident of birth born into a situation beyond hope. And Jesus' disciples, absorbing the wisdom of the time, thought enough to turn to their teacher to explore the question of sin. There must be some reason, some reason somewhere, for this man's blindness. Perhaps it's because of something he did. Or maybe something his parents did. There has to be an explanation.

His healing doesn't solve the problem. It only exacerbates it. People don't recognize the guy anymore. Wait, this can't be the same man, can it? Something in the moral order of the universe must be off-kilter, for if his tough-luck circumstances were the result of the sin of his parents or the man himself, then his restored sight must mean the moral order of things has changed, and that just can't be. And when the man is brought before the scrutiny of the Pharisees it gets more complicated yet. Not only is there no celebration of the man's restored sight, there's critique of Jesus. He must be a sinner too because all this went down on the Sabbath, and on this special, blessed day, no amount of work is allowed.

And so it goes, the parents are brought in for questioning. The man is questioned a second time by the Pharisees. He finally just blurts out; *I don't know much about who is a sinner and who is not a sinner. All I know is that once I was blind but now I can see.*

Sin, tradition, and figuring it all out

It's pretty easy and probably natural to automatically put ourselves among those whose sight is really pretty good....we see, we "get it," but, of course, there are those others, the Pharisees and the "you know who they are" of the world who just don't see, they don't "get it." Actually I think the whole story we have in John 9 is more nuanced, "muddy" if you will, then we initially give it credit for. It's not just a simple morality play where wrong is wrong and right is right, the lines being very clear.

Jesus tries to turn the conversation away from a determination of who is sinning and who is not sinning, towards an approach to life that says every occasion is an opportunity to experience light and glory. But that's hard for the Pharisees of Jesus' time just as it is hard for us today. I'm pretty sympathetic to the Pharisees because I see a lot of myself in them.

Think about it. The text itself reflects that the Pharisees themselves struggled to know what to say. (it says in verse 16 *they were* divided) After all they had the sure knowledge, the received wisdom going all the way back to Moses, hundreds and hundreds of years of collected experience and wisdom that together taught them important truths. No one can question Moses. He's stood the test of time. And so we know this particular detail of truth, small though it may seem to be, that we just don't do certain things on the Sabbath.

But they were confronted with this extraordinary quandary. We have in front of us this extraordinary sign, this healing...we know sinners can't do things like this, yet we "see" it with our very own eyes. And this Jesus, who is he? We are only now just beginning to learn of him, to watch him, to hear him. Moses, we know. We've linked ourselves to his wagon for a long, long time...and it has worked! This Jesus, we do not know who he is or where he comes from.

The formerly blind man is perhaps bemused but more likely just plain frustrated with it all. He's thinking *all you smart people around me...but where were you when I was over there, discarded trash on the side of the road, and now look at me, that's all I care about...talk all you want, I can see.*

We have here, it seems to me, this ageless conundrum of timeless ageless, wisdom and truth forced to deal with new insight, new ways, and new ideas. And if you think most of us find ourselves on the, to put it simply, the *viva la tradicion* side of things and other times on the *viva lo nuevo*. The text might tempt us to think that when the new idea comes along we need to jump on the bandwagon. I mean, Moses (who represents the traditional) had a good word but

the presence of Jesus (representing the “new”) clearly trumps the traditional. It seems obvious from our perspective. But if we were right there, right in the moment, it may not have seemed so clear.

Christian history is surely full of case studies elaborating on this old dynamic. We have no shortage of them in our own time, in our own church, and in our own conference and denomination.

Clearly our long struggle with issues of sexuality, and especially homosexuality, is one window through which we can view this healing text in John 9. We have received wisdom too, received truth that has biblical moorings and seems to have served us well, for hundreds and hundreds of years. But then, what does one do when presented with the living witness of committed, covenanted same-sex couples, whose hearts desire is to live joyful, Godly lives a la all their happy heterosexual friends? For these friends, and some of us know them very well, it's very clear. We can parrot the words of the formerly blind man. *You know, I recognize that Moses was a great man and I believe in Moses, but all I know is; now I can see.*

Another issue that's on the low burner surrounds music. Mennonite Church USA is in the very earliest stages of exploring the idea of a new hymnal. But quickly the question comes, how in the world do you put together a musical book that speaks to the great breadth of congregational singing in our congregations? Three ring binder hymnals with some core songs (of course, but which ones are core?) and then you can pick and choose as you wish? A hymnal with accompanying overheads? A little of this and a little of that? What do you do?

Our own music reflects cultural and theological persuasions which have served us well over the years. When new voices, new styles, new ways present themselves, it's easy to think, *you know, what we have and know and love has served us so well for so long...and some of this new stuff, we just don't know it or understand it.* But there's the side here too that says with the formerly blind man *I know the way you've done things is wonderful and has a point, but all I know is, now I can see.*

A final word

What can we say, when it is all said and done? At the very end of the story Jesus is asked by the Pharisees rather frankly: *surely we are not blind, are we?* They are recognizing the possibility that the enlightened, those who can see, may actually be the blind ones. Jesus' response seems a little tricky but I believe it is essentially a cautionary word. Jesus is saying, I'm here to bring healing and light, to infuse that into the midst of darkness. But also I'm here to upset those who arrogantly think they know.

In the last moments of this worship service we will sing a couple of hymns. In just a few moments we will sing these words:

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Come unto me and rest."
Lay down, O weary one, lay down your head upon my breast.
I came to Jesus as I was, so weary, worn and sad.
I found in him a resting place and he has made me glad.*

And then at the conclusion of our service we will sing:

*Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us, for we need you to help us find our way.
Gentle Shepherd, come and feed us, for we need your strength from day to day.*

We return to where we began. Jesus calls us to lay our head upon his breast. Here we rest our weary body to find rest and strength. In the end, Jesus is among us as a healer and savior more than as a judge.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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--First Mennonite Church, Reedley