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John 9:1-41

First Baptist Church of Ken-Gar

WHAT DO WE SEE?

I like the story of First Baptist Ken-Gar and Warner Memorial worshipping together. The beginning of the story precedes you and me, Carl. It precedes some of the people in this sanctuary. But there was a time when some folks did not see the need for two congregations that had different histories, that had different memberships, that had different church governance, that had different worship practices – some folks did not see the need for two such congregations to come together to worship. Some folks did not see the way clear for these two congregations to come together. But by God's grace, some saw the need and that the way could be cleared for it to happen, and by God's grace, something special still happens all these years later when we come together to worship.

Well, we have quite a story not only of our own experience. We have a story from scripture today about what people saw and what people would not see. Jesus heals a man who had been blind since his birth and when the people see what the Lord had done, they throw the biggest celebration imaginable. Not that I have direct experience of knowing what to do when someone who has been blind all of their lives, forced to beg on the streets to keep body and soul together, has his life suddenly utterly transformed by God's grace. But you can imagine that such a celebration certainly includes each person who had known the man going up to him, saying, "You've heard my voice, now you can see the face that goes with that voice." Let me show you a mirror so you can see yourself with your own eyes. The celebration of such a demonstration of God's grace might be too big for just one community of faith – it would make sense to invite at least two congregations to come together to celebrate the great thing God had done. Wouldn't it be great to invite the man who had been healed to tell his story. Perhaps he would sing "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." ¹ We Presbyterians don't often clap a lot, but our hands would be coming together repeatedly when we heard something like that. There would be hugging and hallelujahs to join with the prayers of gratitude unto God. But for some reason, the Gospel of John does not include the description of the big celebration. Why not? Because people could not see the reason for it - now that's a vision problem!

The celebration did not happen because the man's healing meant troubling things for how they saw that things were supposed to be. There was a man who had been born blind, and everyone expected to be able to classify him in that way for as long as he lived. Even today, society and daily culture depend upon people first being categorized and, then, staying in their place.

But Jesus threw a wrench into that system. For one day, he met this man who was begging - at that time there was little else for someone who was seriously visually impaired to do to try to meet his basic needs. Before Jesus addressed the man, the disciples were ready to turn this poor man into an object lesson. Their question illustrated how they saw things. Acting as if the man was not only visually impaired, but also hearing impaired, they ask Jesus in the man's presence, who did something to lead to his blindness. Was it (a) the man's sinfulness or (b) his parents' sinfulness? It had to be one or the other in order to for them to hold onto their practice of interpreting life in the simplest way – in this case, seeking clarity through blame. Both possible answers assumed that the blindness was heaven-sent as an expression of divine judgment. But Jesus doesn't choose (a) or (b). He chooses answer (c): none of the above or this is not from above. Instead he said these kinds of situations are an opportunity for God's good intent of greater vision and wholeness to be sought.

However, in the face of human need, many of us prefer to use that need to shore up our own belief system or our own political agenda. We see someone in need and we systematize. We ask ourselves, "How can my belief system, or morality system, account for this phenomenon?" And with our categorizing and moralizing, we somehow don't see the way clear to take action to relieve human suffering. Why is there blindness or why is there poverty or illness or lack of access for those who have health problems to get them addressed? These situations get used to try to place the blame on a particular class of people or sometimes on a particular race of people or on people of a particular immigration status. Someone reads the events a certain way because they want to see a way to blame someone.

But when Jesus sees someone in need, he does not use that person's plight to develop a political or moralistic agenda. Lumping individuals into categories is a long way from comprehending God's redemptive purposes. Jesus refocuses the attention of the disciples on an invitation to join God's healing mission in the world. He spits on the ground and kneads the wet dirt to make some mud to spread on the man's eyes, then he sends him to wash his eyes in a nearby pool. The man allows Jesus to touch him. He does what he is told and goes where he was sent and he washes his eyes, and then he is able to see.

As people find out about the great change that has taken place, this is when the celebration should be beginning, don't you think? But instead, there's this series of conversations that demonstrate a sense of confusion, consternation, and controversy. The people had paid so little attention to the destitute in their midst that when the man who had been blind was no longer in his place they had difficulty recognizing him. There were also certain authorities who see the man's newfound state of health as a threat to their sense of order and propriety. They decide the story is a fraud and set out to prove it.

In doing so, they find out that the so-called healer had kneaded clay in order to put mud on the man's eyes. This had all happened on the Sabbath and kneading clay was one of 39 categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath. More than a thousand years earlier, seven days a week the Hebrew people had been forced to knead clay into bricks when they were slaves in Egypt, and so for their health and well-being, there was to be a day when the kneading of clay would not take place. But that prohibition was not put in place to prevent the kneading of clay to open a blind man's eyes. This Sabbath observance was intended for their health and well-being. The man formerly blind didn't fit into their theology and this Jesus who purportedly healed him didn't fit either, so they would turn a blind eye to it all, and label them both as 'sinners.' Instead of seeing the wonderful thing God had done evidenced right in front of them, these authorities saw only their narrow reading of scripture. Here's someone who reads the scripture a certain way because they wanted to see a way to shame someone. They couldn't disprove his story, so they run him off.

This story is full of irony. A man who was blind from birth ends up being able to see and everyone else in the story can't see a blessed thing even when the blessed thing was a person who was right before their eyes. The man is not only given the gift of physical sight – he grows in spiritual insight throughout the story. He grows in understanding who it was who had come to him, touched him at his point of infirmity, sent him to be washed clean, and gave him new vision to see where to go. Once he could see, when asked about it, he first says it was a man called Jesus who had initiated all of this. Then later he is asked what he thought of the man who opened his eyes and he declares he must be a prophet. A bit later in the story the man's understanding of the events is challenged and he grows stronger in his witness about Jesus saying emphatically that he is from God. Jesus had come to him at the beginning when he was a blind beggar and had given him sight. Jesus comes back to him at the end when he is an outcast again for what he is coming to believe. And Jesus

allows the man to see the One who gave him his vision. And the man calls him, "Lord," and worships him.

So what are we to take away from this story? We could follow the example of the disciples and use this story as a device to lay blame on folks who we see as misreading events. We could follow the example of the religious authorities and use this story as a device to cast shame on folks who we see as misreading scripture. But something tells me that our purpose is not to lay blame or to cast shame, but it is to allow the One who came to touch us at our point of infirmity, to allow the One who came to send us to be washed clean, to allow the One who came to give us new vision about where we are to go from here. And by God's grace, we will use whatever vision we have been given to read the events around us and read the scripture in a way so that we joyfully join with the One who came in reaching out to others who also have need to see God's redeeming work in their lives. And as we do so, we can join in a needed celebration, a celebration big enough where not just one, but two communities of faith come together because we are seeing something amazing that is happening. Say it with me, what we are seeing – "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

¹ John Newton, *Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound*, 1772

