

THE PARENTS OF THE MAN BORN BLIND

John 9:1-12, 18-25

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jacob Bolton on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 19, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

9As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “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.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know...”

¹⁸...The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” ²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

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In her novel *Revelation*, Peggy Payne tells of a Presbyterian minister who experiences a theophany, an encounter with the divine. One afternoon, while grilling steaks in the backyard, he hears the voice of God speaking to him. It's a revelation. It's the kind of revelation that will change his life; he will never be the same. But the rest of the novel tells of the price he pays for that revelation. Do the leaders of his congregation or the leaders in the presbytery rejoice with him? Not exactly. They do, however, provide free psychiatric care and paid administrative leave.

This sort of response is not too farfetched, because imagine if someone in your workplace claimed the same thing? “Hey everyone, God is speaking to me!” Most likely after a few attempts at intervention, and a couple of “reassignments,” eventually that person would have to go, because they were claiming to see things to which we all are blind.

That's the way the formerly blind man found it in today's lesson, sharing his revelation; his own encounter with the divine was a struggle. In John's Gospel the story of his cure takes exactly two verses: Mud on his eyes, wash

in the Pool of Siloam. But the controversy surrounding the cure: 39 verses. And that, as Paul Harvey would say, is the *rest* of the story.

The rest of the story is that the church has always been pretty good at investigating spiritual irregularities, but not always so good at acknowledging the power of God that cannot be contained by any preset religious premises. It is not difficult to sympathize with the Pharisees today is it? They were only attempting what many of us have been trained to do: observe, describe, and explain the phenomena, all while dare I say attempting to maintain some sense of order. Almost a Presbyterian Scientific Method.

But does this story mean that one must possess special knowledge to be a follower of Jesus? Does this story mean that one must see the way God sees?

No – not knowledge, but I would recommend that a follower of Jesus possess at least a base level of Jesus *acknowledgment*. Not knowledge, but acknowledgement. Let me explain.

The formerly blind man did not know all the correct religious phrases with which to interpret his miracle. We don't know much about him other than that he was blind and that he was a beggar. He was not pious in the traditional sense or even respectful of his elders. What he knew for sure was that once upon a time he sat in darkness, and now the whole world was drenched in sunlight. And he acknowledged that by saying, "One thing I do know, is that though I was blind, now I see."

"One thing I do know," he said. It's an acknowledgement that we all can claim for how the Light of the World has greatly helped us through some of our most trying of life's seasons.

"One thing I do know." "One thing I do know." How is that for ironic understatement? As if the only smallest little thing you happen to acknowledge is who gave you sight, who helped you through your divorce, who helped you through that dreadful time at work, who saved your life! The blind man does not necessarily know Jesus, he is not a follower – but acknowledges Jesus with a simple statement about the goodness of Christ.

Dr. J. Louis Martyn writes that this story reflects the historic parting of the ways between the synagogue and the Jews who believed in Jesus. The larger story going on in this healing narrative, is the separation, some might say a schism, of that faith community. Some of Abraham and Sarah's children remain in the Synagogue while others decide to follow Jesus and "the way." That is the backdrop. And this narrative represents a moment in which a relationship is tarnished, and the pieces of that relationship are still being woven back together millennia later. We were once so close. Just how close we still are can be seen in those moments when we acknowledge our dependence on God and place no limits on who and how God saves. If we read this story with this broader broken relationship understanding, we will see this passage for the tragedy it really is and call upon God to write a new ending.

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It is this new ending that I would like us to turn toward for the remainder of our sermon. For this entire chapter of the book of John appears to this preacher to be full of broken relationships, each yearning to experience restoration or at least an acknowledgement of a new, or better way.

For example, in the previous chapter, directly before the encounter Jesus has with the blind man, he narrowly escapes being stoned by the tribal leaders – so I would state that relationship is “not in a good place.” The Pharisees are distraught because Jesus heals this man on the Sabbath – resulting in tenuous relations with the blind man, the blind man’s parents, and ultimately again with Jesus. Instead of an acknowledgement of the divine or even acknowledgement of simply a good thing happening, the result is direct conflict with leaders and community members arguing over whose knowledge of the incident and its interpretation is the most accurate, powerful, appropriate, ordered. All of these set in the context of the earliest days of the fracturing of the community surrounding the Synagogue.

Though the legacy of today’s Scripture could be the interfaith outcome of Jewish-Christian relations, I want to instead focus on the relationships humans have with one another, with each other, and then further, how those relate to our personal relationships with God. As Larry taught last Sunday, there is nothing that God does not already know about us when we pray or when we confide our innermost thoughts to the divine – but how often we broken humans forget that. For it is often how we engage with our human siblings of the spirit that points to how we also interact with the divine – and if those aren’t aligned, well then it is a growing edge for our own faith.

I want to thank the work of Sam Wells, who inspired this reading of John, and whose work I am hermeneutically reshaping into this teaching example. In the spirit of this entire chapter of the gospel narrative – one that provides example after example of broken interpersonal relationship, and one that, as a whole, details the very beginnings of the breaking of the relationship between those that follow Jesus and those that do not, I want to provide three simple words we may need to unlearn when framing our interpersonal relationships, and then three that I recommend we should use in their stead – all in a faithful effort to enhance and restore our relationships with one another. All are found in this passage from John – all can change our lives, and perhaps even the church, for the better.

The first word to unlearn is *if*. *If* is a word that pervades human arrangements. *If* you keep your side of the bargain, I will keep mine. *If* you weren’t so annoying, exasperating, and infuriating, I’d be kind, gentle, and understanding. *If* you would simply tell us, blind man, who healed you, then we would certainly let you back in the faith community. Come on, won’t you just tell us?

As we strive to restore our interpersonal relationships in the name of Christ, I recommend we dispense with the word *if*—and **replace it with the word *always***. When the word *always* is used, then love is no longer conditional; it is permanent. Even with those with whom we disagree. It’s true that each and every human being isn’t going to be the best of friends, there are relationships that need to be terminated, and those experiences are sometimes unavoidable, even necessary. But Westminster Presbyterian Church is a faith community more centered on aspiration, than desperation. *If* is the language of contract; *always* is the language of covenant. *If* is provisional; *always* is unconditional. It does not matter, formerly blind man, what you know of who healed you or not, you are always welcome here. Always.

The second word to unlearn is *for*. *For* is the curse of any and all relationship. Do you know how many hours I’ve spent making this *for* you? Have you any idea what it costs me to work so hard *for* you to have a comfortable future? *For* names the accumulation of unspoken resentment, until like a bursting dam it floods into and throughout a relationship. *For* is based on guesswork, assumed benevolence, a private sense of unrecognized moral superiority. John clearly states how afraid the blind man’s parents are and we can see it

here – “clearly he is of age, and we don’t know how our son’s sight was restored, but he is of age, and we don’t know anything about Jesus, so don’t ask us, our son can speak *for* himself. He is of age.”

As we strive to restore our interpersonal relationships in the name of Christ, I recommend we do away with *for* and **replace it with the word *with***. *For* is about entitlement; *with* is about sharing. *With* requires constant relating, regular recalibrating, honest rebalancing, and doing those tasks, together. The point is never to do it well, or quickly, or efficiently whatever the “it” of a relationship happens to be – but the point is to do it in community. Relationship building is not a performance to make the world applaud; it’s a mystery to enter together more deeply and often dearly beloved, that involves a little bit of risk. “We do not know anything about Jesus, but clearly our son can now see. It is a miracle, let us go find him so we can answer all your questions *with* him and celebrate this good news together.” *With*.

Which leads us to the third word to unlearn is *ask*. We see far too much of this unhealthy *asking* in today’s passage. Who sinned, the man or his parents? Is this not the one who used to sit and beg? Is this your son? Perhaps, more personally these are the questions like is there anything you haven’t told me? Did you love someone else before me? Why haven’t you finished this yet? You can almost hear the anger crescendo in these questions.

Now let me state something clearly, inquiring for information, being in dialogue with one another is not bad – it actually is healthy – but it is always the questioner who sets the agenda. The one *asking* has the power.

As we strive to restore our interpersonal relationships in the name of Christ, I recommend we do away with *ask* and **begin with something deeper, and that is *wondering***. To share your own memories of the past is an act of trust and tenderness. To share your *wonderings* about the future is intimacy of an even higher order. I *wonder* what you’re looking forward to. I *wonder* what you’re afraid of. I *wonder* who you most want to talk to. I *wonder* what you most need from me. You’re going to Scotland with the church in a few weeks – I *wonder* what you are looking forward to doing there. You just became a church officer – I *wonder* what you don’t want us to talk about during a session meeting. You just joined the church – I *wonder* what about this faith community called you to this Sanctuary and this font and these people and this God. You once were blind, but now you see; I *wonder* what God has in store for us. *Wonder*.

A *wondering* doesn’t set an agenda, *wondering* sets a stage. It says, dream with me, ponder with me, explore with me, discover with me. When you *ask*, you almost always have an idea of the right or desired answer. When you *wonder*, you’re opening your heart to something neither of you yet knows.

Three little words. *Always* takes away the fear of the future. *With* means you’ll never be alone. *Wonder* means the future is an adventure.

Additionally, these are three words that everyone can relate to and aspire to. Crucially, if these three relationship words are put into practice, someone may discover something about their own discipleship – because one of the most important things about our interpersonal relationships, how we interact with one another, is that it almost always sets the stage for how we interact with God.

Further, the vital thing about these three words is that they describe three ways we relate to God: with confidence that God is never going away, *always*, with joy in the world together, *with*, and with awe at God’s

glory, *wonder*. Every human relationship is a way to practice the *always*, the *with*, and the *wonder* of being together, that we may better be able to comprehend the *always*, the *with*, and the *wonder* of being with God.

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I have taken a passage that tells the miraculous healing of a blind beggar, in a setting that describes the fracturing of a community, and taught us a method for the healing power of relationship restoration. Our world has rarely seen anyone lovingly perform that task with the grace and power of Mother Teresa, who famously said, “Because we cannot see Christ, we cannot express our love to Him in person. But our neighbor we can see, and we can do for them, what we would love to do for Jesus if he were visible... let us put love into our actions, beginning in the family, in the neighborhood, in the street. It is difficult, but there is where the work begins. We are co-workers with Christ, a fruit-bearing branch of the vine.” One thing I do know, is that if we can acknowledge that, then we can greet and love everyone we meet *always with wonder*.

Amen.