

Faith Mennonite Church
April 3, 2011 – Lent 4
Becoming Human: Called and Shaped by Jesus
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Stumbling toward the light
1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41

We've already heard one story this morning about seeing. When Samuel went to anoint a new king, he went with a physical image in mind. Samuel went thinking that a king should be male, mature, strong, and probably good looking—someone that people would rally around; someone who, by their stature, would bring fear to the enemy. But God directed Samuel to see in another way. In one of the many reversals that we find in the biblical story, God elevated the youngest of the sons of Jesse; the one who was out of sight and mind. Except that he was in God's sight.

The lectionary for this 4th Sunday of Lent offers another story about sight. This one is about a blind man who receives his sight. It's found in the 9th chapter of the Gospel of John. I am going to read it and as I do I will ask you to close your eyes and imagine yourself as physically blind. Listen for the different groups and reactions in the story and consider how each group can see or is blind to what is happening.

Let's begin. Close your eyes. [Read John 9:1-41]

As I said last Sunday, the Gospel of John was most likely written at the end of the first century, after a schism had occurred between the Jewish synagogue and Jewish Christians, which for a number of years had maintained unity. As members of the Johannine community developed an increasingly "high Christology"—meaning that they came to understand Jesus as pre-existing with God since creation (which was not the view of Jesus among all early Christians) this caused tension with the larger Jewish community. We can see that conflict written into this story. Jesus gives sight to a blind man who comes to recognize Jesus as Lord and Messiah, while the Jewish leaders find fault with Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. The story makes clear that those who believe in Jesus, according to the understanding of the Johannine community are the ones who truly see, while those who are maintaining the boundaries of a law-based religion are blind.

In the Old Testament story, although Samuel comes to see something that is quite different than he thought he was looking for, the story is fairly straight forward and primarily is about Samuel, the prophet, learning to see. This story from John is much more complex with quite a string of characters, each with a slightly different set of interests.

First we have a man who is described as "blind from birth." The first group of people who respond to his situation are the disciples. Their reaction is to see only his blindness, his disability, rather than his full humanity. They do not wonder what it is like to be blind. They do not wonder what resiliency has allowed him to survive as a blind man. They do not stop to consider whether he hears, feels, tastes and smells things differently precisely because he cannot see. They jump to a single conclusion: his blindness is a sign of sin. And if there's sin, someone's responsible. Who sinned? The man or his parents?

The disciples can hold the man at bay and limit their interaction if they can frame his existence in terms of sin. But Jesus sees the whole person. And he offers healing to the man in a way that gives the man some agency and dignity. He doesn't just do a quick miracle, which would call attention to himself. He mixes a part of himself—his saliva—with mud, the stuff we are all made of, according to the creation account in Genesis 2. Then he puts it on the man's eye lids and sends him to a pool to wash. The man has a choice. He can go and receive his sight. Or he could have stayed and continued begging. He made the choice to receive the gift of sight.

The first reaction we find to the man's new reality comes from his neighbors, the persons who are closest to him. Maybe they are fellow beggars, maybe street vendors and those who came by shopping. Like the disciples, their relationship with this man is framed by his disability. While some are willing to venture and believe that somehow he can now see, others are unwilling to accept or fathom a new reality. He's always been blind, he's always been a beggar.

The neighbors take him to the Pharisees. The story doesn't tell us why exactly. In the gospel of Luke when Jesus heals 10 men with leprosy, he sends them to the priest. But in that case, because having leprosy made one ritually unclean and unable to take part in religious life, it was necessary to be confirmed ritually clean so they could return to their communities. Perhaps the neighbors feared that something new was happening that would upset the status quo. Some may well have been troubled by the fact that this happened on the Sabbath. Instead of rejoicing and celebrating, and trusting the man's testimony, the neighbors want to get an official opinion.

The religious leaders are also incapable of "seeing" what has happened. They are more concerned with proper observance of Sabbath than the wholeness that has come to this man. Whereas the disciples could only see this man's disability in terms of sin, now the religious leaders can only see the healing, because it happened on the Sabbath, in terms of sin. And they blame the sin on the one who aided the healing, Jesus.

Meanwhile the man continues to tell his simple story: He put mud on my eyes, I washed, and now I see.

There's one more set of actors who are brought into the story: the man's parents. One would expect them to be overjoyed but instead they act almost as if they do not know their son. They must have lived for a long time with the stigma of having a blind son. The disciples were likely not the first ones to question whether the parents had done something dreadful to cause their child to be born blind. Certainly a son that has to make his living by sitting and begging is not someone the parents can brag about in a Hanukkah letter. Their sense of shame probably only added to the fear of confirming their son's testimony, which by association, would confirm an act done by this man Jesus.

So the man who received his sight remains invisible. People look at him but can't see the new reality. They ask him to tell and retell his story, but they do not listen and they do not hear. Instead they drive him out. But he is not alone because Jesus seeks him out. Their first encounter was by happenstance. This second meeting is purposeful. Jesus does not intend to leave him out in the cold as others have done. Jesus comes and allows the man—who has not yet seen him—to meet him face-to-face, to relate to him in the deepest form of communion, confessing his faith and giving thanks in worship.

What are the things that keep people from seeing in this story?

- For the disciples it is a preconceived notion of cause and effect. Blindness must be an evidence of sin.
- For the neighbors it is an inability to let someone in their community change and begin a new life.
- For the religious leaders it is certainty and control, it is a need to theologize in the abstract.
- For the parents it is shame and fear

Only the one deemed blind really sees in this story. He takes Jesus at his word. The power of the sight he receives gives him a calm boldness in the face of opposition and an open spirit to acknowledge the One who has given him new life.

May we have eyes to see as God sees. May we be bold to testify to the life and the sight we receive through Jesus.