
Simple Faith

I have to tell you that I *love* today's story from the Gospel of John; I have since studying this story at seminary. I think it's the pluckiness of the man born blind in his responses to his inquisitors, along with all of the other very realistic details in the story—the evasive response of the parents for example, because of the threat of persecution. It's a rich and colourful story.

You may have noticed as well echoes of some of the other stories we've been listening to from the Gospel of John over the past few weeks. There is the language of day and night that has been part of our earlier stories. And while this story centers on the healing of a man born blind, it also makes clear that blindness can be spiritual as well as physical. That connects back to the theme I talked about last week, the idea that people do not recognize, do not see, who Jesus is and what his appearance in the world represents.

As we did last week, I want to walk through this story so that we might see what it is trying to say to us today. Again, as with last week, there is a lot here and we won't be able to deal with all of it in the space of the sermon.

The story starts off with a relatively simple description of the healing. Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud, and spreads the mud on the man's eyes, and instructs him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does as he is told, and he can see. All that takes place in the space of two verses. The whole rest of the story unfolds as a series of responses to this simple healing.

Something simple and straightforward gets entangled in a series of arguments and accusations. Something overwhelmingly positive and worthy of celebration gets used as justification for persecution and attack and excommunication. At the heart of this story is a conflict between a simple, yet powerful, faith that allows for miracles, and a learned skepticism and worldly cynicism that demands proofs, and insists that everything occur within predetermined categories.

As we shall see, the conflict is between Jesus and the simple, yet powerful, faith he inspires and the religious authorities and institutions. It's Jesus versus the synagogue; or to translate the story to our time, it's Jesus versus the church.

When the man is asked by neighbours and passers-by how it is that he can see, he gives a simple straightforward answer: the man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and told me to go and wash; and I did, and I can see. His simple response is met with the first demand for proof: Where is the man who did this to you? He answers truthfully, I don't know, and they bring him to the authorities.

He's asked again how it is that he can see, and he answers again—this time shortening the answer, to make it even more simple: "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." BOOM. This leads the Pharisees—the religious experts—to get into an argument, with some saying that Jesus can't be from God because he did the work involved in healing this man on the sabbath, a perceived violation of Jewish law; while others argue that the healing is proof that Jesus is a holy man.

This simple healing confounds their theological categories. They "know" God's law, and they "know" how God is supposed to behave, so these two things—the sabbath violation and the healing—can't be reconciled for them. How is this possible? they ask. So they turn again to the man, What do you say about who this man is?

Again he answers simply: He is a prophet. It's an echo of how the woman of Samaria named Jesus, after he had revealed her marital history. Something of God is happening here. But that's not

possible according to their categories, so they choose to disbelieve the man, suggesting that he wasn't really blind, that it's all a fake. So they call on the man's parents.

You can perhaps detect the rising tone of hostility here: "Is this your son, who *you say* was born blind? How then does he now see?" We have no indication that the parents were witnesses to the healing, so really this is a question about whether the man was really blind, or whether he and his family have been lying about his condition all along. Are you trying to pull the wool over our eyes with this so-called miracle?

See how far we've come: from the simple, joyful liberation of a man who had been blind since birth, and had been reduced to begging on the street—a clear sign of the fulfillment of God's promises of what would happen when the Messiah came; to a cynical, distrustful, accusing stance on the part of religious authorities, who believe that God is not capable of doing anything outside of their purview.

And it gets worse. The parents give their cagey answer: Yes he is our son; yes he was born blind; but that's all we know. You'll have to ask him for the rest. We're told it's because the parents are intimidated; they've been told that anyone who affirms that Jesus is the Messiah will be cast out of the community. Their "church" has said, There's no room for that sort of thing here. You want to be part of this community, you'll toe the line.

Stymied by the parents, the authorities go back to the man; and again, note the hostile tone. They want him to swear an oath: "Give glory to God!", but that is immediately followed by "We know that this man is a sinner."

Tell the truth, they command, and then immediately set parameters for what is allowable as truth. We know, we have predetermined what it is permissible to believe, and you'd better not go outside of that.

And here's where the man's pluckiness shines through: "I do not know whether he is a sinner," he says. That's all part of your expert theological categorization, and I'm no theologian. "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

One simple thing I know: I was blind, reduced to begging a the roadside, with no prospects. Now I see, and I've been restored to life and to community, and I have a lot to look forward to. I was lost, and now I'm found. I was addicted, and now I'm clean. It doesn't matter to me who, or where, or how; one thing I know: I was blind, and now I see.

And here's where the hostility becomes overt: What did he do? How did he do it? they fume at the man. He refuses to play their game; he's given his simple testimony, and they have rejected it. Then they reviled him, we are told.

And then the man does turn their theology on them: what happened to

me is undeniably of God, and yet you refuse to see it. Then they pull rank and say, We are the experts; how dare you presume to tell us about God. And they drive him out.

The story concludes with Jesus' return. In response to the man's enquiry about the Messiah, Jesus says "the one speaking with you is he." Again an echo from last week's story, where Jesus said to the woman of Samaria, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." Jesus reveals himself to a believer.

So what is this story trying to tell us? Well, again, lots of things, because this is a rich story. What I'd like to focus on today is this conflict that I've been describing: between the simple, yet powerful, faith of the man born blind and all our learned theologizing, our worldly cynicism and skepticism; and how all that plays out in the church.

If you have been reading the Observer, or if you have read my doctoral thesis, you'll be aware that we are living in a time of theological ferment in the United Church.

The lightning rod, or the conversation starter, in all of this is usually the debate over the place of Gretta Vosper in our denomination. Gretta tends to be a polarizing figure in our church, but one outcome of her challenge to the church is that we are being forced to think about our theology.

The theme for this year's General Meeting of BC Conference—that is the gathering of representatives of United Church congregations from all over BC at UBC in May—is “How Big is Our Tent?”, and the intention is to explore the theological diversity of our denomination, and ways of staying connected across our differences. I've been asked to participate in a panel discussion at the meeting, to share some of my views.

Where I've come to—as a result of my studies over the past three years, and working through my thesis—where I've come to is an appreciation for the simple, yet powerful, faith expressed by the man born blind. He's the recipient of amazing grace, and he just wants to celebrate that, and live his life in grateful response to what Jesus has done for him. He doesn't know how, or what, or why, and he doesn't really care.

And yet the people around him: not only his neighbours and people who used to pass him on the street when he was a beggar, but even and especially the religious people, the religious leaders, the clergy—they are all blinded to what he has experienced. They are blinded by their predetermined categories of what is possible and what is permissible. Ultimately there's no room for the miracle in their community and they drive the man out.

In some ways that reminds me of the church today. We've become deeply skeptical of the miraculous, and we

demand to know how, and why, and where, and who. We want to interrogate Scripture and the teachings of our tradition, all according to the standards that we have developed, in terms of what is possible and what is permissible. For the last century and a half, we've drawn our criteria from the world of science.

Many people in the liberal church have developed complicated theologies that explain the nature of God in ways that are consistent with quantum physics. And I shake my head and say, I'm not smart enough for that kind of theology.

At the other end of the theological spectrum, evangelicals also set out complicated arguments that reflect their certainty about God's law and how God is supposed to behave. They become God's policemen. And I shake my head and say I'm not smart enough to be that certain about the mind of God.

All I know is I was blind, but now I see. I was lost, but now I'm found. And I just want to live the rest of my life in joyful and grateful response to what Jesus has done for me.

That's not to say that science is not important, or that thinking through our theology is wrong. Those human faculties are gifts of God, meant to delight us, and meant to be used in the service of God's kingdom. We're meant to use those gifts, not to talk ourselves out of things, but to get ourselves more

deeply involved in God's saving, sacrificial love for the world.

But perspective is important: God is bigger than our science, and God is bigger than our theorizing about God, and we must not let those things—our thoughts and categories—blind us to what God is doing among us.

I do not know a lot of things about God, but one thing I do know is that our God is a God of amazing and gracious surprises, for those who have eyes to see them.

And for that we can only say, Thanks be to God. Amen.

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