

Welcome the Light

sermon digest

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John 9:1-17, 24-25

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It should have been a time of great rejoicing; but strangely, it was not. As a matter of fact, it was a time filled with contention. According to John, Jesus healed a man born blind, a man who had not seen light and colors his entire life; but rather than having a parade and sending up balloons at his healing, his family, his friends and his hometown church wrinkled their brows, scratched their heads and drew back in suspicion and fear. It's actually quite a long story, indicating something of its importance. But strangely, the actual healing itself consumes only two verses while the controversy, the haggling and harassing that follow take up a full thirty-nine verses. As we have seen before, the details of John's stories are there for a purpose. What is he trying to tell us?

The story is one of John's enacted parables. Although the other Gospels contain stories of Jesus healing a blind man, the differences in John's story are such that it stands alone. John depicts Jesus proclaiming, "I am the light of the world," and then turning to demonstrate the truth of his words by giving sight to the man. This is another point of John's distinction from the other three Gospels. He places repeated and extended claims upon Jesus' lips concerning his identity. The core of these claims can be found in the "I am" statements, which are seemingly modeled on the "I am" exchange between Moses and God at the burning bush. "I AM WHO I AM," Exodus records God saying to Moses. "Say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (3:14). Twenty-six times "I am" statements are placed by John on Jesus' lips. Mark has one instance and Matthew and Luke, two. The story is obviously told to demonstrate something of Jesus' identity as one sent to bear light; but it also speaks volumes about the world into which the light comes. It reflects the situation of Jesus' day, John's day and our day. **The coming of God's light disrupts the comfort of our rules.** Jesus' healing of the man born blind instigates a lot of questions—questions, interestingly enough, concerned not with the man's welfare, but with maintaining the questioners' comfort level in their own perceived world of reality. The disciples, apparently ready to pass on the other side of the road, glimpse the man and ready to engage in detached debate, pose a query; "Rabbi," they ask, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Theirs was not an uncommon question. Actually, it was one of the hot button issues of the day. Disregarding the solemn caution posed in scripture by the story of Job, their theology sought to distance them from other people's suffering, positing it safely out there, among those who had sinned. Due to the difficulty of assigning blame to a newborn, they did admit to some unease. Blame the parents? Or perhaps in light of the ancient story of twins Jacob and Esau wrapped in ruthless combat *in utero*, blame the fetus?

Jesus dispensed with the question and reached out to the man in his need. I recall my friend Helen Parker voicing appreciation for Jesus' words. Born blind, she celebrated the fact that Jesus decisively discounted sin as the basis of the man's disability. I thought of Helen this week as I read the article "Who Sinned That This Child Was Born Uninsurable?" by United Church of Christ pastor Gunnar Cerda. The father of Benjamin, a fun-loving 7th grader, brilliant in math and science but afflicted with language and motor limitations and social meltdowns due to Aspergers Syndrome, Cerda voices his exasperation. His son along with one in every 150 children in the U.S. diagnosed with Autism Syndrome Disorders was branded uninsurable at that time due to a "pre-existing condition." "When the question was posed to Jesus ages ago," Cerda insists,

it was the same basic question we face today: Who sinned that this child should be marginalized and excluded from full participation in society as a person of sacred worth? Jesus' answer then is just as relevant today: No one sinned, and no one deserves to be excluded. . . . In short, there is nothing that was done which should have deserved exclusion from full participation in society, or removed such a person from the care and compassion of the community, either then or now" [*Sojourners*, 2009].

I am also reminded of our own daughter's experience as she and her colleagues extend themselves to the limit in stretching abysmally limited resources to meet the needs of children acutely in need of timely and sufficient counseling and treatment. If our nation suffers from any deficiencies—and it does—our deficiency in mental health care, particularly for children, is near the top of the list. Rather than categorizing and dismissing, rather than writing rules that make some people in our society outcast and invisible, we are called, Cerda insists, to see them through the lens of faith. Viewing them in light of God's love, we are called to become "co-creators with God" and rewrite the rules of our society, creating a future of hope in the place of despair. I couldn't agree more.

The coming of God's light welcomes us into a fellowship of love. The rules and the questions, of course, did not stop in John's story with the disciples. As a matter of fact, if the story is broken down into six scenes, Jesus appears only in the first and last. In-between, the man is left to fend off the seemingly interminable interrogation of everyone he meets. John includes that long intermission in order to speak to a

church beset some 50 or so years after Jesus' ministry with incessant and insistent rejection and acrimony of the world around them. "This," John is saying, "is what happens to those who open themselves to the light of Jesus. Read and see," John says to his contemporaries, "if the man's experience does not resonate with your own."

The healed man tries to go home again but cannot. Rather than joy and celebration, he is met with suspicion. "Who are you?" the townspeople want to know. "And who is this Jesus?" They haul him before their religious leaders, who are interested in reports of miracles, especially if they're performed by unauthorized individuals and, even more, if they can be demonstrated to violate a law. "Are you sure you can see?" the authorities ask the man. "Were you ever really blind?" The leaders then turn to the parents. "Are you sure he is your son? Are you sure he was blind?" "Whatever joy they may have had," Fred Craddock sympathetically observes, "is drowned in fear." Expulsion from the synagogue and social disgrace is a high price to pay even for a healing, and they are unwilling to pay it [*Christian Century*, March 14, 1990]. The authorities grill the poor man a second time. Armed only with his experience and the conviction that God would not bless a sinner with such power of healing, the man refuses to denounce Jesus as a sinner and is himself expelled from the synagogue.

Anger and frustration, Craddock observes, seem to rule the day. "A few days previous the man's life was blessed by Jesus and now his old friends disregard him, his parents reject him, and he is no longer welcome at his old place of worship." But then Craddock continues: "What a blessing!" And indeed, in the eyes of the late first century church to which John's Gospel is addressed, what a blessing. Faced with rejection of family, friends and seemingly faced themselves with expulsion from the synagogue, they recognize the Jesus who returns to the scene on learning of the man's expulsion and like the man, reaffirm their experience and their faith.

Much of the world rejoiced this past week when Pope Francis in a very frank and open interview blasted the church's obsession with "small-minded rules" and "transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines." Sending shockwaves through the church, the pope went on to urge pastors to focus on being merciful and welcoming rather than focusing only on divisive issues like abortion, gay marriage and contraception. The church, he said, must be like a "field hospital after battle," healing the wounds of the faithful and going out to find those who have been hurt, excluded or have fallen away [CBS News/AP, September 19, 2013].

Protestants who are wise recognize in the pope's words not just erring on the part of the Catholic Church, but a challenge and often a failure of our churches as well. Discerning the nature and meaning of light in Jesus Christ in the context of religious pluralism and cultural diversity in which we live today may well be our greatest challenge. Surrounded by persons who have never been a part of traditional discussions about God, how do we open ourselves and our investigation into the light of Christ to them and their insights? Rules and boundaries can certainly protect our sensitivities and keep them away, but we should be sure that is not the security extended to us by Christ. The light we have encountered in him is not the light of a protected cloister that delivers us from our fears but a light that goes before us as we walk despite our fears. Such a walk, Frederick Sheets, chaplain and pastor of the Church of Christ at Yale University, suggests, means that we will have to be willing "to see with different eyes and hear with new ears the many ways God in Christ is manifesting Godself in our daily lives and the world. This will require that we rethink our notions of the nature of God in Christ and our identities as Christians [*Christian Century*, March 3, 1993]. Some, Sheets admits, have done so and like the man born blind been rejected. But, be sure of this: Christ will find those who have been rejected and invite them into his fellowship. What a blessing!