

Getting to the Missing Bottom

sermon digest

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John 9:1-34

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In this age of science we are always trying to get to the bottom of a problem, as if every question leads to a single answer. The bottom line is seldom the bottom line. There is always more to know, to accept, or to understand. The mythology leads us to believe that every problem can be solved if we work through layers of discovery until we get to the bottom layer of truth. The way to God is investigation and analysis, but the missing bottom tells us that our pseudo-science investigations are a bridge to nowhere. In our search for the bottom line we are shocked to discover a missing bottom.

Half of the Fourth Gospel is structured around seven signs: changing water to wine, healing the official's son, healing the lame man beside the pool Bethzatha, feeding the 5,000, Jesus' walk on water, healing the man born blind, and raising of Lazarus from the grave. In the Fourth Gospel, miracles are "signs." Like signs on the highway, miracles direct us toward the destiny of the Gospel, toward the passion of Christ and the resurrection.

Like healing the lame man (the third sign), the sixth sign, healing the man born blind, occurs on a Sabbath near another pool of water, this time the pool of Siloam. The lengthy story unfolds with interest, intrigue, and humor. I recall a seminary chapel service in the 1960's led by Pastoral Care Professor Wayne Oates. In place of the usual sermon Oates gave a slow, careful reading of the story with a few parenthetical comments. A few times he just paused to laugh at the ridiculous.

The story begins with a question from the disciples that reflects a standing theological debate: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Actually a proof text can be found in the Torah, the Decalogue no less (Ex. 20:5): "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me." However, the Prophet Ezekiel (18:2) took issue with the application of this proverbial connection of the sins of parents to the suffering of the children. Ezekiel declared that parents and children are responsible for their own behavior. Rather than joining the blame game, Jesus dismissed the debate with "Neither" and healed the man. Opening blind eyes carried spiritual overtones. Night and day, darkness and light are symbols of evil and good. Jesus "the light of the world" had come to pierce the darkness of sin to give sight to the blind while exposing the blindness of those who see.

Healing on the Sabbath was the trigger event that erupted with excited questions and confusion from the neighbors and launched an investigation by religious authorities into the facts of the healing and the character of Jesus. The story then revolves around interviews, the man born blind, his parents, and eye witnesses. In this story, Jesus is never confronted directly. He reappears briefly at the end to speak with the man and to give meaning to the event. Throughout the story we never lose sight of the lead question of the disciples, "Who sinned?" that launched the investigation.

Bureaucracy loves investigation. With tongue in cheek, the author of the Fourth Gospel seems to enjoy the chase, getting to the bottom cause of human suffering. Someone "born blind" was viewed as the victim of God's judgment on sin. Was it fetal sin? The old story of Jacob and Esau, twin brothers, seems to allow for the possibility that someone can be born to cheat and plunder. Did the child inherit the pain of the parents' sin? Let's get to the bottom here. Who sinned? Before we get through the story, we are asking, shall we blame the child, the parents, Jesus, society, or all of the above? Before we throw out the question entirely, consider the nature/nurture discussions of our day. Are criminals made or born? If our character and decisions in life are determined from birth, why not blame God?

Genetic research is raising old questions about the origins of destructive behavior as well as the source of diseased bodies. Are we the helpless victims of our DNA passed from one generation to the next? Was Hitler right? Are all of the problems of humanity traceable to our biological origins? Are violent behavior, dishonesty, sexual orientation, chemical addiction, heart disease as well as cancer embedded in our genetic code beyond the reach of medications and attempts at behavioral reform? Who sinned? If we cannot fix the problem we can at least fix the blame. We can stand around the victim and play word games. We can ignore his suffering in order to exonerate ourselves; we have no share in the cause and no responsibility for the cure. The story reminds me of the typical response of Congress to politically hot issues of the day. Launch an investigation!

Our first family TV set was purchased around 1951. I remember the McCarthy Hearings that ran from

1950-1956. The search for subversive communists produced a TV drama, "I Led Three Lives," about a spy pretending to be a communist to uncover and block conspiracies to overthrow the government. I was a child, but I remember. One summer the McCarthy Hearings, more accurately called "humiliations," were run on daytime TV—quite a spectacle! The hearings were finally discredited when McCarthy himself was exposed. It turned out that the scandal was the investigation rather than the investigated, numerous innocent victims of the hearings. Rather than a search for the truth, the hearings assumed that the truth is obvious, that subversive communists are hiding in high places, working to overthrow the government. All the Senator needed was names to fill in the blanks. The hearings turned out to be a witch hunt that served to destroy the innocent rather than to expose the guilty.

The healing of the man born blind disintegrates into an investigation. In reflection on John 9, David Albert Farmer (*Interpretation*, Jan, 1996, p. 60) warns that we can get so caught up in analysis of the details of a disturbing case that the person gets lost in the details and the investigator gets distracted from the objective of healing the pain. Could it be that the life of a person is more important than the investigation?

Note the contrast: Jesus had no interest in the chase to get to the bottom cause of congenital blindness. He was committed to healing. The religious authorities had no interest in healing. They were consumed by the chase to label Jesus, his disciples, and finally the man who was healed as *sinner*s. It was paralysis by analysis. Although the Gospel wants to pin this on the "Jews" as if the whole community were caught up in the chase, it really belongs to the bureaucratic leadership. In the age of philosophy in the Christian West, medieval divines were said to have indulged in hours of discussion about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The love of analysis is a characteristic of bureaucracy whether it is found in Judaism, Christianity, or secular government.

The bottom is missing. The physicist introduced us to string theory in the Forum on Religion and Science. He began with the history of science and the quest for the most basic building block of nature. The word *atom* emerged long before scientific research discovered and began to analyze the atom. Smaller than molecules the atom was believed to be the bottom line, the basic stuff of which the universe is comprised. But research has taken science into subatomic particles and to new theories of origins. The TV science program "Nova" called string theory the theory of everything. Even in science we never get to the bottom. There is always more to discover, more to know.

Carolyn began her graduate study in Christian Ethics with Henlee Barnett, who was known not only for his willingness to swim against the stream and his integrity of life but for his rich sense of humor. I was teaching theology at seminary, and Henlee decided to poke fun at the philosophical quest for God: philosophy is a blind man trying to find a black cat in a dark room at midnight. He loved theology as much as I did, but he had learned not to take theology too seriously. Sometimes the best answer to our question, like the question of the disciples, "Who sinned?" is in the discovery that the question leads us nowhere. Finding an answer may be far from the truth. Finding an answer may ignore the multiple layers of complexity that surround the question. Reaching a conclusion is seldom a conclusion of the quest; it is more likely to be the preface to the next question.

When we get to the missing bottom, it is time to accept that the universe, thus, the God who made the universe, is far beyond our grasp. It is time to accept with humility our own ignorance. Our task is to avoid substituting means for ends. In Christ we are called to value persons over ideas, to heal lives over analyzing causes, to open our blind eyes to the power of God's love.