

SERMON OF AUGUST 22, 2021 – FASHBAUGH

“BLESSED – AND ALONE?”

John 9: 1-38; Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 23

Before the man who had been born blind was given sight by Jesus, the man's life was perfectly predictable. He went out every day to a familiar street to beg, and he had no reason to think that any of his tomorrows would be any different from his past days. He would hear familiar voices. He would experience sameness. And because this blind beggar was a familiar part of the world of regular passers-by, he reinforced sameness for them – though their sense of continuity could not be as pronounced and as dreary as it was for him. He wasn't a husband or a tradesman or a farmer or a merchant. He was, simply, a blind beggar. His life lacked even the modest level of variety that could be enjoyed by those who supported him through their pursuit of useful purposes. The man who was born blind had, effectively, no tomorrows – only an indeterminate lay-long repetition of the present day, which was indistinguishable from yesterday.

Still, though, there was comfort in the sameness – in familiar words of people on the street, in not having to make decisions, in not having to influence anyone in any way (his apparent condition as a blind beggar was, in itself, a sufficient appeal and argument), in having an absolutely secure place in society. In fact, some of the sighted people who dropped coins in his bowl may have envied him at times – at times when life's uncertainties threatened their peace, their feeling of continuity, their comfort derived from sameness.

Jesus turned the life of the man who had been born blind upside down. We can hardly imagine what it must have been like to have, one day, a new dimension in knowledge-gathering sense experience. But we can, to some extent at least, appreciate the man's new condition. A once-familiar world must have seemed strange. We might imagine that a sense of objectivity came upon the man, as he took in the world with truly fresh perceptions, and that this objectivity even affected how, now, he *heard* the life around him and *felt* its material surfaces.

The experience and response of the man must have affected his appearance, because some people for whom he was a familiar part of a familiar scene didn't recognize him: “The 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?’ Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’” What happened to the inner man, arising from his having been given sight, was occurring in the outer man. Once a familiar figure who supported a sense of continuity in others, he became a stranger. A familiar face that wore a pathetic look of supplication or vague smile of thanks was gone.

The man who had been born blind lost, when his life as a blind beggar ended, his sense of how he was *to be* for others. This became apparent in the way he interacted with Pharisees who interrogated him. It seemed that he had lost the understanding that he was supposed to regard these important men with unquestioning respect. Because they refused to believe the simple truth and tried to pressure him into giving them a report they might find palatable, the former blind beggar responded with ironical humor: “I have told you already [that is, the story of how Jesus gave him sight] and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” Armed with objective clarity, the man stood apart from the absurd coil in which the Pharisees had wrapped themselves – the logical tangle in which they found themselves: If Jesus gave sight to the man on the Sabbath, then Jesus did work on the Sabbath and was, therefore, a sinner. But if he was a sinner, then he could not have performed a merciful miracle. If the merciful miracle did occur, however, then Jesus *must* be regarded as a sinner; he did work, after all, on the Sabbath. But it was a *merciful miracle* that he performed. But if Jesus did not actually give the man sight – perform the merciful miracle –

then he didn't actually work on the Sabbath and therefore could not be charged with sinning, which would undo the general categorization of him as a sinner. Such a muddle! The problem for the Pharisees was two-fold. They felt compelled to challenge the idea that this stranger from unknown parts was a holy man of God. He was not known to them as a holy man of God and so, if that wasn't what he was, then since he posed a threat to their position as God's chosen ones in the community, he must be a sinner. The second aspect of their problem was that they were locked in by a piece of deductive logic, the first premise of which was, "If a man does any kind of work on the Sabbath, that man is a sinner." Naturally, the Pharisees in the episode were angered by the flippancy and impertinence of the former blind beggar when he suggested that they might be interested in becoming disciples of Jesus.

The former blind beggar could see the situation clearly, while the Pharisees who had confronted him, tortured by their own "tortured logic," felt themselves forced into a perspective that was more legalistic and less open to the idea that the Living God was operative in their day than was characteristic, generally, of their sect. Because these Pharisees felt threatened by Jesus, they retreated into a position more characteristic of Sadducees and the teachers of the Law who supported the Sadducees and other authorities of the Temple in Jerusalem. We're told that these Pharisees declared, "We are disciples of Moses! We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man [Jesus], we don't even know where he comes from." In his reply, the man who once was blind but now could see seemed to care not a straw for the authoritarian claim of the Pharisees trying to intimidate him. He insisted upon the truth: "You don't know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eye of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." The former blind beggar's reward for speaking the truth and offering an example of unencumbered logic was ejection from his hometown synagogue.

The man who is liberated from a condition of complete dependency as a blind beggar becomes a man alone. He is alienated from his parents, who were so afraid of losing association with the synagogue that they refused to testify to the truth. No longer associated with the synagogue himself, benefits he might otherwise derive from the. Association – such as help in finding a new way to make a living, for example – are denied him. He has lost his place in society, since his reason to be a beggar is gone. Word about his uppity conduct when called upon to respectfully explain things to the Pharisees is probably going around. Once a humble blind beggar who was deferential and obsequious in all his dealings with other people, he is now a man who fancies himself to be some kind of truth-teller – as people who very much dislike disruption in their picture of expected experience see him. There are those too who, like the man's parents, fear losing favor with the Pharisees. The man's liberation has probably made him an outcast – to the end of his days, it's likely, alone.

But he is not completely alone. After he is ejected from the synagogue and is alone — trying to comprehend the terms of his new life, we might imagine – Jesus comes to him. Jesus asks him if he believes in "the Son of Man." Certain scribes who prepared copies of the *Gospel of John* thought, apparently, that Jesus's question could be misunderstood; to they had Jesus ask, "Do you believe in the *Son of God*?" They wanted it to be clear that when the man says, "Lord, I believe," he is declaring belief in the Messiah, the Savior of Humankind. The man believes that his life has been transformed, not by a mere prophet, but by a Person of God, in Whom and through Whom there is Eternal Life. The man who once was blind and now can see has been made a new man through the Grace of God. In his new condition, through faith in the embodiment of Divine Grace, Jesus, he has come into a union that can never be broken. While in his outer life he may seem to be a man alone, in his inner life he is never alone.

We are all alone, objectively speaking. In no one else's perceptions can there be an exact replication of our own perceptions. No one in our outer lives can experience our own, inner experience of things. Professional

associations, friendships, marriages, clubs, and churches too – they can provide a feeling that we are in union with others. But the objective fact is that we are alone. At times, the understanding of our radical freedom to look at things with our own detachment can be frightening. But it is here, where we are perhaps breathtakingly afraid of our freedom and fully alienated from all that would offer a sense of union to our outer selves, that we are prepared to encounter the Grace of God. In this communion, we can never be seriously alone.