

OPENING SENTENCE:

In Christ there is a new creation. The old has passed away; everything is new!

PRAYER of ADORATION: We give you thanks God our Father, for mercy that reaches out, for patience that waits our return, for love that is always ready to welcome us and bring us home. You are faithful, and you are kind. Today we join together with each other, to declare your praise and to worship you, and you alone. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.

Sermon: Now I See

Scripture: John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, "Neither this man or his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 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." He kept saying, "I am the man". But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was the Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man that is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes that he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and ask them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore, his parents said, "He is of age, ask him." So, for a second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he came 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 eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and you are trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the

Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see," your sin remains."
THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Over the past few decades several cultural observers have voiced concerns about the erosion of social capital in the United States: the breakdown of neighborhoods, lower rates of participation in organizations like the PTA and churches, and fewer bowling leagues. People are *Bowling Alone*, and that is troubling to many people. Even more troubling to others are reports about the breakdown of a more basic American institution – the family. Many people are understandably concerned about high rates of divorce, the scattering of extended families, and pressures to embrace new family configurations.

This loss of social capital is troubling not just to those who are directly involved in those institutions, but also to social observers, because the latter are aware of the side effects that social isolation can have for communities and individuals. Communities with more isolation tend to feel, and maybe are, less safe; people often have less stability when they are isolated from friends and loved ones; and a recent study suggest that they may be less happy too. Happiness, it seems is contagious, and we are more likely to catch it if we are hooked up with happy family members, friends, and/or neighbors.

In light of these concerns some people look nostalgically to the communities of the past, in which people were more connected, attentive to one another, and supportive. That was when people knew how to take care of each other – or did they?

Reading John 9 through the lens of anxiety about collapsing social capital is interesting, because it is so counterintuitive. All our presuppositions about the strength and health of earlier communities and family systems collapse when we read this text, because each of the supports, which we assume are in place, fails to deliver. The text narrates the story of Jesus healing a man who had been blind from birth, and the reactions of his community, the religious authorities, and his family. Nothing plays out the way we might expect it to.

The first surprise is the community's reaction; they do not recognize the man who was born blind. This is so odd.

The man has lived in their midst all his life; his neighbors have interacted with him, perhaps helped him cross the street or draw water or gather food; they have worshipped with him. Why do they fail to recognize him after he is healed? Is it because the only marker of his identity was his blindness? Has the fact that he was differently abled been the only thing they could ever see in him?

This raises an issue for any of us who interact with people who are differently abled. How do we identify and come to know people who are different from us? Do we allow disability to be a defining marker, he has one leg or she stutters, or are we able to look beyond that and recognize the humanity of people? How limited or keen is our sight when we are with people who are differently abled?

A second issue surrounds the actions of the religious community, in which the leaders seem to want to control the narrative. The Pharisees do not want to hear or believe the man's story, because it opposes the story they want to tell. They want Jesus to be the sinner, not the hero of the story; they want another explanation, one that leaves them in control of all the religious goods and services.

Perhaps it is reassuring to realize that even in the first century religious authorities fought over ecclesiastical authority. The privileges of defining sin or dispensing grace are powerful ones, and it is no surprise that religious authorities covet them. In one form or another we have fought over these privileges, this power, for centuries, and we continue to do so. This scripture text convicts the religious antagonists who battle over definitions of sin or the gifts of grace and allow those battles to obscure God's presence in our midst. How do we get caught up in battles like this? What issues or preoccupations divert our attention from God's presence and action and passions?

Almost everybody fails the man born blind. Even his family backs away from him, and his parents put their own safety before his welfare. Maybe we can understand an older couple being reluctant to sacrifice their home, work, and their community for their son, but would we not expect them to celebrate with him, be joyful over his healing? There is nothing of that in this text. The parents' fear overwhelms their joy, and they abandon their son to the authorities.

The community fails. The religious authorities failed. The family fails. The only trustworthy figures in this story are the man born blind and Jesus. The man tells the truth, and even in the face of threats, the abandonment of his communities and family, and expulsion, he sticks to his guns. I was blind, but now I see. Again and again and again, the man witnesses to the saving grace he has experienced in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only one the man can trust, and he is the only one we can trust in this story. Although the Pharisees lay claim to dispensing grace, it is Jesus who transforms. It is Jesus who heals. It is Jesus who stands with the man in his final isolation. He stands with us too.

Sometimes when the sun is really bright, or when an artificial light is intense, we need to squint or shut our eyes. (the sun in the early morning or late evening when driving) The brightness seems dangerous to us, and the reflex is automatic. We see this human reaction unfolding in John 9; the light of the world shines bright, and the community, the Pharisees, and the man's family shut their eyes in self-defense. That is the intuitive thing to do, right?

Wrong! The light of the world is in our midst, and we need Not shut our eyes. In fact, the best thing to do is to open our eyes, wide. We will not be blinded by the light. We will be saved.

A preacher can talk and talk about this story, but it is not a story about talking. It is a story about time; before and after, then and now, years ago and today, always and then suddenly. Who we were for years and years and who we are today. The moment of conversion itself is not as important as the difference it made; I once was lost but now am found; was blind but now I see.

Let us be frank; conversions are messy. They can even be down right revolting, as John 9 states, "He spit in the dirt, made mud with his saliva, and put it on my eyes!" and most important of all, they never sound convincing. Just because you had a holy moment with mud does not mean that the rest of us will stop scraping it off our boots. A person has to remember this; one person's ecstatic moment with mud usually looks, to the rest of us, like a classic case of self-delusion. Try to describe it as the man born blind did, and others will question your sanity, doubt your word, and write you off.

The muddy details of John 9 remind us of how carefully we have to tune our ears before we listen to one another's stories.

Focus on what we can actually describe, the difference between before and after. Notice that the man born blind cannot describe his conversion moment to anyone's satisfaction, but he can tell the difference it makes. "All I know", he tells the authorities, "Is that I was blind, and now I see!" This is a better tactic, because now he is talking about things others can see and hear for themselves. They knew him before; they can see him now, and clearly, he is no longer blind!

So let description of the before and after be the thing. Once I saw the world like this; now I see it like this. Once I believed this; now I believe this. Once I lived in a place that now I see was blind to certain things. Now my eyes are opened, and here is what I see and know! These are the stories the church needs to hear.

CLOSING PRAYER: Gracious God, in order that children of earth might discern good from evil you sent your Son to be the light of the world. As Christ shines upon us, may we learn what pleases you, and live in all truth and goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

God's presence and activity in the healing of the blind man cannot be explained because it is not publicly accessible. It is not so much perceived as it is revealed, and it is revealed only to those who are given the gift of faith. The irony in the story is that the blind man receives his sight, but everyone else in the story loses theirs – not their physical vision, but the capacity to believe and understand what they have witnessed. Without exception, neighbors, Pharisees, and parents are unable to see in this event that "God does provide." Only after Jesus seeks the blind man out and calls him to faith in the Son of Man does he truly see. Only after he first believes does he worship the one who is truly from God and who has healed far more than just his blindness.

GO IN PEACE!