

I WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE!

(07/25/2021)

Scripture Lesson: John 9:1-41

“I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”
(John 9:25)

Since we are not sure when our Sunday morning Bible study will be resuming in person, for the next few months I would like us to engage in a kind of Bible study. The goal is to help us (and I include myself in this) better understand what the Bible teaches us about God, about Jesus, about ourselves, about other people, and about life and death.

For example, we could take one of the gospels and read through it, one chapter every week. We have done this with shorter books of the Bible those summers when Pilgrim Church and our church coordinated worship service coverage, a practice I would like us to reconsider once the pandemic restrictions are lifted and we can get to know Charlie Eastman, the new pastor at Pilgrim Church.

In these reflections I would like us to look at how the Bible, which is a collection of books or writings, was compiled, what was included in the canon, what was left out, and what types of literature we find in it. In relation to the various types of literature, we noted last week, there may be a reason why Jesus used metaphors and parables in his teaching. I recently ran across an example of just this point.

This past week, our daughter-in-law, Ann-Marie, and our granddaughter, Emily Kate, came up from South Carolina to visit. It was great to have more of our scattered family together and for Ann-Marie and Emily Kate to spend some time with Kristen and Mike’s fourteen-month-old son, Miles. Because of the (pardon my French!) stupid coronavirus pandemic, they had never met this newest member of our family.

I have always wondered why we Americans say “pardon my French” preceding or following our use of a cuss word. I really don’t think French people swear a lot. Perhaps they do, but because they speak so fast and run their words together, I may not pick it up when they are swearing. I also have never heard a French person say “pardon my English” when they use strong or potentially offensive language. Then again, maybe they do but I don’t pick it up. Anyway, that’s not the point.

While she was here, Ann-Marie mentioned a recent conversation with a person who describes himself as a confirmed atheist. I found this interesting; I didn’t know they were confirming atheists nowadays! I had always thought of the Rite of Confirmation as having to do

with high school-aged Christians from religious families, but what do I know? (I do kind of wonder what their ceremony is liked—if it is a religious ceremony confirming the Rite of Confirmation on atheists!). But, again, that’s not the point. The point is that Ann-Marie shared her somewhat frustrating experience trying to explain to this person why she believed in God and why her religious beliefs were an important part of her life. It seemed to me that the person, simply to be difficult or annoying, intentionally took an oppositional stance in relation to Ann-Marie’s sharing, challenging everything that she believed and held dear.

I don’t have a problem with atheists or agnostics, especially intelligent ones like Sigmund Freud and Richard Dawkins. I can understand how an atheist can doubt or deny the existence of a deity, and I can understand how an agnostic who, because of the dearth of empirically verifiable information, can confess that he/she doesn’t know if God exists. One point of connection that I have with both groups of people concerns the interesting word “exists,” but that’s not the point I am trying to make. I do find it annoying if I try to engage in a conversation with either atheists or hard-core Christians who have no desire to dialogue, to share with and learn from each other, but who simply want to attack my religious beliefs. Life is too short to waste time on these kinds of conversations.

The scripture passage from the Gospel of John contains the account of a healing. There are several biblical accounts of healings by Jesus and, after his death and resurrection, by the apostles. This account is somewhat different in that it takes up an entire chapter of the Gospel of John, which has only twenty-one chapters. So, let’s see what is so important, so special about this healing.

First, the healing doesn’t teach us a lot about Jesus, though it does tell us something about the symbolic power of saliva or spit and its power to transform, to bring life out of earth or dirt. It is not until the very end that the focus shifts to Jesus in a passage that I believe to be of doubtful authenticity. Second, it doesn’t teach us much about the man who was healed. The chapter focuses more on the religious authorities, their response to his healing, their skepticism that such a miracle could happen. The Pharisees keep trying to put the man’s healing in one box or another, but the healing doesn’t fit neatly in any of their boxes. This is what the man keeps telling them, but they do not listen.

It seems to me that the religious authorities make things too complicated. The more they question the man, and the more they try to place Jesus in one category or another, the more they miss the point of the healing. They are so contained within their limited theology that they miss the power, the beauty, and the significance of the man’s healing encounter with Jesus.

Several months ago, as I scrolled through Netflix, I rediscovered a movie that I hadn't seen in a long time. The movie, *Coneheads*, a 1993 science fiction comedy starring Dan Aykroyd, Jane Curtain, Michelle Burke, Adam Sandler, and Chris Farley, was a takeoff from a *Saturday Night Live* skit. Perhaps some of you are old enough to remember it.

The plot is simple. A family of superior beings, extraterrestrials with cone-shaped heads, find themselves in New Jersey (of all places!) after a recon mission for their home planet goes awry. Stranded in New Jersey, they are forced to live as typical suburban humans. I won't spoil the plot for you, but I was struck by a particular scene in which one of the coneheads is sitting on a bed in a motel reading from *Gideon's Bible* and laughing.

You probably think that this is a strange example to use in a sermon. I beg to differ! I think it is entirely possible that advanced beings from another galaxy might find our religious language, our religious concepts, our religious formulations quaint or amusing. I can picture them saying, "I can't believe this is what those humans on earth thought God is like!"

It seems to me the height of egotistical delusion to believe that we human beings with our few senses, our little brains, and our limited language could possibly understand and accurately describe the mystery of the Creator of the Universe, the Source, the great Unity whom we call God. This is the reason why our understanding of God must continually evolve, not through developing increasingly complex systems of systematic theology, but through our life experience, particularly our religious experiences. We need to continually let go of our childish understanding, our childish expectations of God to discover and rediscover the living God. This was what the ancient Israelites realized: that we must continually smash our idols, our false images of God, if we are to come into a relationship with the living God. This is also the message that Jesus brought to his followers.

Imagine if we, with our present-day scientific understanding, were transported back to ancient Greece. Thales believed everything was made of water, that water was the basic stuff of the universe. For Anaximenes, it was air. For Anaximander, it was a combination of hot and cold. Empedocles maintained that everything was composed of four elemental principles: earth, air, fire, and water. I hope we wouldn't laugh at these primitive scientific beliefs because it is rude to laugh. However, based on our current understanding of the atomic structure of matter and the 106 elements that comprise it, let alone the insights of relativity theory and quantum mechanics, I suspect we would find their formulations at least quaint.

Like the Pharisees, we attach too much importance to religious words and concepts. Wars have been fought and inquisitions carried out over the matter of whose formulation of the

Great Mystery of the universe is the one and only correct one. Yet we need words. We need words to think. We need words to help us understand. We need words to communicate.

The Bible is a collection of words. At its best, the Bible points to ultimate reality, or at least one version of ultimate reality. It is not the Way, but it can help us find the Way. This is how Jesus used words: he used them to point toward the reality and the experience of the kingdom of God. He could not give us this experience, but he could point the way and help us experience what he experienced. This explains why he used parables in his teaching. No words, no concepts can do justice to the truth which he experienced and to which he witnessed.

The historian of religion Heinrich Zimmer said that the truths that are least important can be articulated most clearly and taught most easily. The truths that are important can be articulated or taught, but only in a limited, distorted form. Then he said that the deepest and most important truths cannot be articulated at all. When we come to them, we are reduced to silence. They can only be experienced. We might say that they can only be expressed in symbols.

The educator Jerome Bruner once said, “Concepts in psychology are nonsense. But the best ones are liberating nonsense. And God greets those in heaven who propose liberating nonsense.” As a psychologist, I can confirm that concepts in psychology are indeed nonsense. As a minister, I can confirm that concepts in theology are also nonsense. But the best ones, both in psychology and religion, are liberating nonsense: they help to set us free to be the unique individuals, the beautiful creations that God intends us to be.

The man has been blind from birth. Note that he does not ask Jesus to heal him. Jesus, who is walking down the road, sees him. Jesus’ disciples want to engage their master in a theological discussion about why this man was born blind. Jesus is not interested in a discussion about why bad things happen to good people. He restores the man’s sight to show the power of God to bring light from the darkness. I think that this is an example of grace.

The man’s neighbors had so stereotyped him as a blind man that they question whether this sighted man is the man whom they knew. They cannot conceive of him in his new condition. They do not relate to the man but to the category in which they had placed him. (BTW, we do this a lot!) They also have such a limited view of the great mystery of life that there is no room in their view for miraculous healing. When they ask him how his eyes were opened, the man says that Jesus made mud and put it on his eyes. When he washed it off, he could see for the first time in his life. I’m sure this didn’t thrill or convince his listeners. We note that, to this point, the man has not seen Jesus.

The Pharisees, the religious authorities investigate the healing. They are so invested in the rules and regulations, the laws of their religious tradition that they regard Jesus as a sinner for healing the man on the Sabbath. They have such a limited grasp of the mystery of life that there is no room in it for miraculous healing. Rather than admit that this can happen, they question whether the man was really born blind. His parents confirm that he was.

The Pharisees call the man back to meet with them. They try to get him to condemn Jesus. The man refuses to engage in their theological argument about what is or is not a sin. He stands on his experience. He says that all he knows is that he was blind but now he sees. From this, he draws the conclusion that Jesus must be from God. The Pharisees, because they do not want to give credit to Jesus, become enraged and drive the man from their presence. It seems that no one can just be happy for the man and give thanks to God for the healing he has experienced!

Jesus then searches for the man and finds him. He asks the man if he believes in the Son of Man. The man apparently has no idea what this means. He asks Jesus to help him find the Son of Man that he might worship him. Jesus tells him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking to you is he." The blind man now not only sees; he *really* sees! He sees Jesus. He sees what his neighbors and the Pharisees have missed.

What is important is not the words, but the experience. "I was blind but now I see." Christianity is not about an idea; it is about a *relationship*. This is the reason why, in our prayer every communion Sunday, we engage in a conversation with Jesus. We try to remember that Jesus is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. If we open our eyes, we will see him. If we open our ears, we will hear his eternal word. If we open our hearts, we will be transformed by his love.

Let us return to Ann-Marie's conversation with the confirmed atheist. First, I give her credit for being much more patient with him than I would have been. Even more important than this, however, is that the dialogue raises the question of how we can know whether our religious beliefs are true, especially when we consider the previous quotes on the limitations of language by Heinrich Zimmer and Jerome Bruner. If I had been talking to the man, I hope I would have been able to remember these two quotes, for they would help to explain why I can't produce a convincing argument for the existence of God. But I probably wouldn't have remembered these quotes on the spot. Things come to me a little slower nowadays.

How can we know if our religious beliefs are true? We know because of the fruit they bear in our lives. When we find that which we seek, it touches us deeply. It changes our life. And that which we seek, that presence, has a healing, liberating power. When Jesus removes the

scales that cover our eyes, when he helps us see ourselves, other people, life, and God through *his* eyes, our lives are changed. We experience a healing. It might be the healing of a relationship. It might be the healing of the way we look at life. But we, like the man, are be healed.

Our closing hymn this morning is *Amazing Grace*. As we sing it, let the words help us to be open to the experience of God's grace, the grace that led Jesus to heal the man who had been blind from birth. Let us be open to all the miraculous ways that our Lord brings light to our darkness, brings healing to our lives. Then, like the man blind from birth, we can say, "I was blind but now I see."

We can see the one who searches us out just as he did with the blind man in the story, offering to remove the scales from our eyes, offering us the opportunity to see ourselves, each other, and life more clearly. Then he would help us bring this new sight, this new light to a darkened and troubled world.

*A reflection shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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