

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/30/2014, The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Exodus 17:1-7, John 4:5-42  
“What Sayest Thou of Jesus?”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our Gospel Lesson, from John 9. The Pharisees question the man born blind. They asked the chief question of all, both for him and for you and me:

<sup>17</sup>They say unto the blind man again, What sayest thou of him...? (John 9:17, KJV)

They mean Jesus. What do you say of Jesus?

Let's begin the story of the man born blind with the opening words of Jesus to the poor man:

<sup>5</sup>As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”  
<sup>6</sup>As he said this, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, <sup>7</sup>saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. (John 4:5-7, RSV)

There he was in his accustomed place. His neighbors were used to seeing him beg. So I imagine him begging when Jesus and his disciples pass by. The disciples use him as prop in a theological question. They see him, but he cannot see them, because he is blind. So, they just talk about him as if he were an object:

<sup>2</sup>And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

My wife, Carol, is sensitive to this -- to the way we can talk about others as if they are blocks of wood, and not people. Especially she worries about that for the elderly. She told me recently about a lady who thanked her for referring to her as a “person in a wheelchair.” People mean no harm, the lady felt, but sometimes they refer to her simply as a wheelchair. “Hold the elevator,” someone says, “a wheelchair is coming.” And the woman thinks to herself, “What, have I turned into a wheelchair?”

But Jesus does not simply talk *about* the blind man. He also touches him and speaks *to* him. Perhaps this simple humanity of Jesus toward the blind man is the clue to this story. As we shall see as we go along, the blind man progresses in his

estimation of Jesus. He refuses to condemn Jesus, but says increasingly lofty things about Jesus. To me, he is following his heart when it comes to Jesus. And perhaps the first step in that is simply that Jesus spoke *to* him, not just *about* him.

So, the disciples ask about the blind man, Who is to blame? Jesus answers that neither the man nor his parents are to blame for his blindness. But while Jesus was giving this answer, he turns to the man the disciples had talk about and does something with very ancient overtones to it: he spits on the ground, makes some clay, and anoints the eyes of the blind man. Saint John the Evangelist would have us think of the beginning, of the creation of man. He who made man from the dust of the earth... he who made all things, and “without whom was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3) stands before this blind man and makes him new. He begins this new creation by making some clay and anointing the man’s eyes. Jesus talks to the man, instructing him to go and wash:

<sup>7</sup>saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). (John 9:7, RSV)

Note that the blind man had not even asked to be healed. He is just sitting in his accustomed place begging. Now, suddenly, he has clay applied to his eyes, and he is instructed to go to such-and-such a pool and wash. He has nothing to lose, I figure, and so he obeys. He goes to the pool of Siloam, washes, and comes back seeing.

## **A DIFFICULT SCENE**

Now, here comes a difficult scene. In one way it is the start of increasing troubles for the man. But in another sense, it is the start of the man’s salvation. It is a scene akin to the one you and I occupy. That is, this blind man has been blessed with *sight*. The problem is that Jesus is nowhere around. He is nowhere *in sight*.

The blind man comes back seeing, and naturally people ask him about what happened. These neighbors are a bit confused about him at first. They are not exactly sure that it is the same man:

<sup>8</sup>The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar, said, “Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?”

<sup>9</sup>Some said, “It is he”; others said, “No, but he is like him.”

But it is he. Perhaps it is simply hard to recognize someone who used to be blind, but is now free from it... hard to recognize someone who has been touched by divinity in such a fundamental way.

So the man confirms that he is the one they are used to. Let me mention an interesting grammatical point here. When the people are unsure whether it is the same man or not, he answers with words that recur throughout the Gospel of St.

John: “I am.” The Greek words are *ego eimi*.<sup>1</sup> — the Bible’s fundamental identification of God. The King James Version and modern versions translate his answer as “I am he” or “I am the man.” But the Greek simply says *ego eimi* — “I am.” Perhaps Saint John is suggesting that this man who has been healed by Jesus is on his way toward becoming a bearer of Christ.

At any rate, the neighbors ask him what happened. He tells the story:

<sup>11</sup>He answered, “The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash’; so I went and washed and received my sight.” (John 4:11, RSV)

Then the neighbors ask the sensible question:

<sup>12</sup>They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.” (John 9:11, RSV)

He has eyes to see now, but Jesus is nowhere in sight.

Theologian Peter Leithart<sup>2</sup> makes much of this awkward exchange between the blind man and his neighbors. He invites us to imagine the plight of the blind man. Here he was minding his own business, begging as usual. A man puts clay on his eyes and tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam. A “man.” That’s all the blind man knows so far:

“The *man called Jesus* made clay...”

But as the man is questioned and as he tries to be true to the blessing he has received from Jesus, step by step he grows in boldness in what he believes about our Lord. Jesus is not there to help him along. He has to sort things out by himself as best he can. But one thing he knows: this man Jesus has done something extraordinary for him, and so he is inclined to think that there is something extraordinary about this Jesus.

So, the man’s first thought about Jesus is simply that Jesus is a “man.” That makes sense. He couldn’t see Jesus when Jesus anointed him with clay, but there was no particular stir from the surrounding crowd. There were no exclamations, as if people could see that an angel was speaking with the man. As far as he knew, it was but another man, like you or me, who had healed him.

---

<sup>1</sup> Leithart, Peter J. (2009-09-15). *Deep Exegesis* (Kindle Locations 2540-2541). Baylor University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis* (Baylor University Press: Waco, Texas, 2009), pages 61ff.

## THE PHARISEES

Now a storm begins to darken the horizon. The neighbors take the formerly blind man to the Pharisees. And then suddenly we learn that Jesus has healed the blind man on the Sabbath. It would be nerve-racking for any of us to have to stand before the Pharisees, because their learning and their piety probably exceeds our own. Furthermore, in addition to their learning and piety they also had authority to expel from the synagogue. For a Jew, that would be akin to spiritual death. It would be a disaster.

The blind man, then, finds himself before the Pharisees, who question him as to what he believes about Jesus.

It would have been diplomatic if the blind man had stuck to his original claim:

*“The man called Jesus made clay...”*

It would have been prudent if the man had made no higher claim about Jesus than this: that he was a man who spoke to him, anointed his eyes with clay, and sent him somewhere where he was healed.

The problem is that there is a miracle to be accounted for. This is a problem for the Pharisees and for the blind man. What shall we say about Jesus who has performed this wonderful miracle?

The Pharisees ask the blind man his opinion. He offers this answer: Jesus is a prophet.

<sup>17</sup>So they again said to the blind man, “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?” He said, “He is a prophet.” (John 9:17, RSV)

Why did the blind man venture such an answer? He must have known that it would make the Pharisees mad. I mean, by the time we reach John 9, Jesus has already offended the religious establishment more than once. In John 2:13-17, Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers in the temple and drives them out with a whip. The leaders of the Jews did not like that. Then, in John 5, Jesus heals the man at the pool of Bethesda – the poor man who had lain ill for thirty-eight years. That was a wonderful miracle, but it caused controversy because Jesus had healed the man on the sabbath day.

*“Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.”* (John 5:8, KJV)

It was a true miracle, but it upset the religious leaders because Jesus did it on the Sabbath. Israel could suffer all kinds of external threats in this world – the dominions of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and now the Romans – but this

was an internal threat. This was a Jew who seemed to be in outright disobedience to one of the central laws of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

And now, in Chapter 9, Jesus is up to it again. I say it would have been politic for the blind man to have lain low when it comes to Jesus. But he doesn't do it. He shifts from calling Jesus a "man" to calling him a "prophet." Furthermore, this poor, lonely man does not back down when he is challenged by the Pharisees. Why, even his parents leave him to fight the battle alone:

<sup>20</sup>His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; <sup>21</sup>but how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." (John 9:20-21, RSV)

There is no one to defend him. He must fight alone. Why does he do it? Why does he stubbornly stick up for Jesus?

## **FOLLOWING HIS HEART**

Friends, let me tell you what I believe here. I believe that the blind man was following his heart. And when we are talking about Jesus, I want you and me to do the same. I want us to follow our hearts.

There are more and more people in our world who calmly say that they are atheists. When young people say that, I usually think that they are the smart ones. I do not condemn them, but rather figure that I am in the presence of an especially intelligent young person. They are the born philosophers. They are the ones who can see the principle of the thing in their schools and surrounding society. They are the ones who see that their education is without God and the television shows they watch are without God, and they are the ones who have enough courage to take the full leap of coherence and to say, "I do not believe in God."

The question is whether their intelligence can lead them to reconsider the matter. When they've looked at the ways of a Godless world, can they be smart enough to revisit the faith of the church? And the place to begin is with the question that was asked of the blind man in today's story, "What do you think of Jesus?" Questions of atheism or agnosticism are too abstract. What do you think of Jesus? If you do not like him, then okay. This is not the right time in life for you to be a Christian. Do you think he is dead as doornail? Then okay, walk on. It is not the right time in life for you to be a Christian. You are not yet ready. But if your heart reaches out for Jesus, do not harden yourself. Do not turn away. Rather as soon as you can, come back to the Jesus who through the ages has won the hearts of people as innumerable as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore, and in believing in him have been made better people on this earth.

---

<sup>3</sup> A point made by N.T. Wright in his little book *John for Everyone*, Chapters 1-10 (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002)

## THE SECOND MEETING WITH JESUS

Well, you know how the rest of the story goes for the blind man. It goes from bad to worse. The ultimate penalty is laid upon the man: he is expelled from the synagogue. He might as well pack up and leave that town and try to start over again someplace else. To be expelled from that synagogue is a social and spiritual disaster for the man.

Except that when he walks out of the synagogue door, then he runs right into Jesus again. Jesus seeks him out. It is almost like the man's baptism. He has been forced to leave his old reality, but is invited to turn to a new one:

<sup>35</sup>Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of man?" <sup>36</sup>He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" <sup>37</sup>Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you." <sup>38</sup>He said, "Lord, I believe"; and he worshiped him.

## AN ANTICIPATION OF JESUS HIMSELF AND US

What this blind man has been through is very much what Jesus himself will go through during his Lenten journey to the Cross. Jesus will be questioned, judged, condemned, and executed. He will be abandoned by his disciples. He will have to face his agony alone. The crowds looking on will decry him and mock him and he will die quite alone, as if all the universe is against him. But as the blind man receives his sight, and in the end something even more valuable – that is, he finds his Lord and his Savior – so too Jesus will find resurrection on the other side of this world's rejection of him.

My sermon this morning has been about carrying on in faith even when Jesus is nowhere to be seen. Look to the left, you do not see him. Look to the right, you do not see him. But that is how it was for the blind man, and that is how it was for Jesus himself. You have the advantage of knowing something the blind man did not know. You know that Jesus is with you, even if you do not see him. Yea, though you walk through the very valley of the shadow of death itself, Jesus is with you. He is your Good Shepherd. And in your heart of hearts, are you not glad of this? Does it not seem exactly right to you that in this hard world at least this much is right: that the Jesus who loved you so much that he died for you is in charge of the universe, that he makes a life of love and nobility worthwhile, and that one day we will gladly bend the knee along with the blind man of old before this Jesus, whom we will see with our own eyes, and give him the glory, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.