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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/26/2017, The Fourth Sunday in Lent
John 9:1-41

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

For my text this morning, I want to lift up the pinnacle of insight which the blind man reaches. His understanding of Jesus reaches the highest pitch in a passage toward the end of our reading — a passage that culminates in worship:

³⁵Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe”; and he worshiped him. (John 9:35-37, RSV)

May this always be so for us too: that our interest in Jesus and his claim on our souls will lead us to worship him — indeed to worship him above everything else this old world holds.

We can distinguish three steps in the blind man’s understanding of Jesus.¹ At first, he believes that Jesus is a man — a good man, no doubt, but a man like other men. Second, the blind man comes to believe that Jesus is a prophet. And finally, we arrive at the pinnacle of truth: the blind man believes that Jesus is God and so, worships him. Let us take these steps in order.

First, the blind man believes that Jesus is a man. When the blind man’s neighbors ask him how he can now see, he answers in terms of a man named Jesus:

The *man* called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes...
(John 9:11, RSV)

Why shouldn’t the man answer this way? The world has never before encountered what this blind man is encountering: someone who is truly human, but also truly God. I cannot blame the blind man for starting off in this humble way. Jesus is a man.

¹ Credit for this three-step progression into the nature of Jesus goes to William Barclay, in his section on John 9 called “Greater and Greater.” Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John, Volume Two: 2* (New Daily Study Bible) (p. 59). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

I just called this first way of conceiving Jesus a “humble way.” And it is. Still, it is a precious thought, that Jesus is a man. It puts him on the same plain with us. He is not out of sight, out of reach, unaware of what it means to be a human being. It means that the One who holds our eternity in his hands knows that we are frail and vulnerable, for he was too. In his years with his disciples, he knew fatigue and hunger. He knew what it was like to have no place to lay his head. He knew about fickle friends, even about friends who deny you and betray you. He knew suffering, and he knew temptation. Indeed, a special point is made of that – this matter of temptation. The Letter to the Hebrews says this:

For we have not a high priest who is unable to *sympathize* with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, RSV)

In another place, this letter makes an even more encouraging point about temptation. It is not simply that Jesus can *sympathize* with us in our temptations, but also he can *help* us:

For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to *help* those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:18, RSV)

It is never pointless, then, to cry out to Jesus in the midst of temptation. Let the temptation burn hot – as hot as can be. Still, in the midst of the furnace let us not forget to cry out, “Jesus, help me!” Jesus is a man. Bless the blind man for saying so. Jesus is a man, who knows what temptation is like and can help us when we are tempted. Call out to Jesus, then, and pray that something of his Spirit will come into you in the moment of crisis. If so, if the Holy Spirit comes swooping into our lives, then we can contend against an army – even an army of temptations.

So, that is the first step. The blind man calls Jesus a man. “The *man* called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes...”

Second, the blind man calls Jesus a prophet. He is wrangled into this. He is driven to this conviction through his conversations with the Pharisees. Some of them do not much like this miracle of Jesus. Maybe they have already turned their hearts away from Jesus -- already made up their minds against him. Or maybe they are sincere in their point about the sabbath day. So, the blind man is brought to the Pharisees. They are honorable folks, held in high esteem by many ordinary Jews. The case of the blind man throws them into division. Some of the Pharisees figure that Jesus must be a good man to have

performed such a miracle. But other Pharisees condemn Jesus for it. They point to the sabbath:

¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the sabbath.”

I think there is a lesson in humility for us here. In referring to the sabbath, these Pharisees are no doubt standing up for the holy law of God. And that is a good thing to do – a very good thing. And yet, we should be mindful that our convictions about the holy law of God might be wrong in some measure. We might be insisting upon a notion of the law that is not yet as mature or generous as it should be.

Let me give you an example from the Bible. I am thinking of the story of the woman caught in adultery. The scribes and the Pharisees bring a woman to Jesus. She has been caught in adultery. They mean to stone her. They wonder what Jesus will say. They quote scripture:

⁴They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. ⁵Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? (John 8:4-5, KJV)

Let us give a charitable interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees here. Let us grant they are trying to stand up for God’s law. They are dismayed at adultery and fear the consequences of adultery on the families of the land if it should go unpunished. So, let us assume that they have high intentions in referring to Moses and God’s law.

The problem is, they have not sufficiently looked into the matter of Moses. They have firm convictions, and they are prepared to act on those convictions. It is just that they do not yet have an accurate grasp of the law. They have strong convictions about a law they have not yet sufficiently understood. For the law to which they refer speaks of *both* the man and the woman:

If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, *both* the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. (Leviticus 20:10, RSV)

Now, where is the man? The scribes and the Pharisees say to Jesus:

⁴They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, *in the very act*.

Well, if she was taken “in the very act,” then she was taken with the man. Where is he? Why do not the stones threaten *him*.

So, that is one point. The Pharisees have not quite quoted Moses correctly. But an even greater point about the Leviticus passage is that the great capstone of interpretation is love:

Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:18, KJV)

It is not unreasonable, then, to think that the magnificent saying of Jesus to the woman caught in adultery is a faithful and mature application of the holy law of God:

Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. (John 8:11, KJV)

It is the same thing with the sabbath day. Good for the Pharisees for standing up for the sabbath, and yet, perhaps they should wonder whether they have really mastered all there is to know about the sabbath. Jesus tries to lead them along into a deeper understanding of the sabbath by reminding them that they consider it alright to lift up a sheep that has fallen into a pit on the sabbath (Matthew 12:11-12), and so why would it not be alright to lift a human being up from misery on the sabbath? In this way, Jesus teaches us to have some humility in our convictions about the holy law of God.

In any case, the Pharisees are perplexed and divided about Jesus. So they ask the blind man his opinion:

¹⁷So 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.”

Now, in my book, that is high praise – to say of someone that he is a prophet. It would be a terrible charge to say that someone is a “false prophet,” but to credit Jesus with being a true prophet is high praise. It means that our Maker speaks to us through *this* person, the prophet. The prophet does not simply speak *about* God. Lots of people speak about God, even atheists, but the prophet does more: the prophet speaks *for* God. So, when the blind man says of Jesus that he is a prophet, it means that in the blind man’s book, he has heard the very Word of God spoken to him. When Jesus said, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam,” the voice might as well have thundered: the blind man now thinks that it was his Maker speaking to him – to *him*, a blind man of no special status or influence.

You and I should credit Jesus with this praise too: Jesus is a prophet. He speaks for the Triune God. When we read the Sermon on the Mount, for example, we might as well imagine heavenly trumpets sounding forth and the angels all urging us on: "Hear this!" they say. "In this Sermon on the Mount, Almighty God is speaking to you!"

And now we come to the third stage: the blind man believes in Jesus and worships him. There is no taking back the first two points: Jesus is a man and he is a prophet. Still, someone greater than a prophet is dealing with the blind man and dealing with you and me. For the blind man, it was no longer sufficient to speak of Jesus just as a man or even a prophet. Napoleon had an interesting saying about that. The story goes this way:

Napoleon was once in a company in which a number of clever sceptics were discussing Jesus. They dismissed him as a very great man and nothing more. 'Gentlemen,' said Napoleon, 'I know men, and Jesus Christ was more than a man.'²

Soon it will be Palm Sunday and Good Friday, when we will ponder Jesus on the Cross. Many good *men* have died, even horrifying deaths. And many true *prophets* have died. But on Good Friday, something different is happening – something greater than our world has ever known before. What happens then is that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who is adored by the angels and who restored sight to this blind man, is mocked and scorned. Our Maker comes to earth, and he is scorned. He is crowned with thorns. It is as if humanity with one gigantic voice shouts to God: Shame on you! He is crucified. If he were just a good man or a true prophet brutalized in this manner, it would be sorrowful enough. But we know men, and Jesus Christ was more than a man. He is our Maker who endures the shame and the spitting and the Cross because some great cause was at issue. You and me – our eternity was at issue.

So, the blind man worships Jesus. In word and deed henceforth, let us drop to our knees beside that blind man and worship Jesus too, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

² Barclay, William. The Gospel of John, Volume Two: 2 (The New Daily Study Bible) (p. 60). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.