

“The Foolishness of God”
Rev. James L. McDonald
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Trinity Presbyterian Church
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I Corinthians 1:18-31
John 9:1-41

My goodness gracious! That was a long Gospel lesson, wasn't it! There are lots of stories in the Gospels of Jesus healing a blind man. But this story from John's Gospel is unique and powerful, ...and long. It is a drama in six acts.

It is, as esteemed Biblical scholar Raymond Brown once said, “a story of how a man who sat in darkness was brought to see the light, not only physically, but spiritually. On the other hand, it is also a tale of how those who thought they saw were blinding themselves to the light and plunging into darkness.”¹

This story of the healing of a blind man reminds me way too much of what still happens in our society – and yes, in our church. Take, for example, what has been happening for the last four decades around the issue of the full acceptance, inclusion, and welcome of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, and queer people in our churches and communities—including their right to serve as clergy, to be married, to raise children, to be accorded the very same rights that everyone else has. These questions have roiled our denomination, divided families, riled our political processes, and sadly,

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 377.

driven GLBTQ people to commit suicide in despair, and encouraged twisted bigots to violence against GLBTQ people.

So, now, listen to this story from John's Gospel as an example of what has happened to us in the PCUSA and in other denominations here in the United States and around the world.

Act 1 begins with Jesus and his disciples encountering a man, who had been born blind. The disciples immediately want to launch a theological investigation. They assume that the blind man's disability was the result of someone's sin. We don't do that today anymore, do we? But, yes, for the disciples there's got to be a prior cause for this physical imperfection—somebody must be held responsible. Was it the man himself or his parents?

But Jesus rejects the theological framework of his disciples. This isn't about sin, he says. It's an opportunity for God's revelation, for experiencing first hand God's compassion and concern for individuals and the world.

Think about that for a minute. Can someone's disability, someone's physical malady, someone's blindness be the occasion for God's revelation? Do we believe that today, in this culture, in this community?

And then, Jesus heals the blind man—restores his sight—after a short speech in which he connects his own presence, his own light, and the light of day with the restoration of the blind man’s ability to see.

That’s the first seven verses. And that’s what most of us remember when we think about Jesus healing the blind.

But obviously this is more than a healing story, or it would have stopped right there, and our reading this morning would have been a lot shorter. The healing story is just part one of this six-part drama.

In Act 2, Jesus has disappeared, and the healed man is back in his old neighborhood, and everyone is upset, including the healed man himself. And his friends and neighbors question him. They want to know—how did this happen? Are you really the same person we’ve known all along? Who is responsible for this change? Where is the guy who did this? And the healed man tries to tell them what happened. But no one is satisfied with his explanation. All that’s come from this remarkable healing is a lot of consternation and confusion.

So now (Act 3) his “friends” and neighbors drag him in front of the religious authorities—the clergy, if you will. “Let’s get to the bottom of this,” the religious leaders say. And now it’s their chance to grill the man. “Maybe we can get some answers,” they hope. Rather than rejoicing in someone’s healing, they find it disturbing and confusing.

And now we learn that not only has Jesus performed an unlikely healing that makes him suspect. We discover that it happened on the Sabbath, making him a law breaker, a criminal. And now Jesus has become a divisive figure for the clergy. Imagine that! Clergy divided about who Jesus is and what his life and ministry actually represent! So now an argument breaks out among the religious authorities about what has happened to the blind man, and who this Jesus is.

And when they ask the blind man what he thinks, he calls Jesus a prophet of God. But instead of resolving the conflict, the blind man's testimony only exacerbates it. His testimony is rejected, and now they religious authorities turn to the healed man's parents. Thus, a simple healing story has turned into a soap opera. Unbelievable, isn't it? I'm sure that if **we** were to witness someone being healed, we would just see that as an occasion to celebrate—not an invitation to stir everyone up with arcane theological questions and debates.

But just when we thought things couldn't get any worse... Well, they get worse. Now (we're in Act 4) the man's parents don't exactly disown their own son, but they basically plead the Fifth. Why? Because they wanted to retain their place in the synagogue. They were afraid. More afraid of being ostracized by their congregation than of the consequences of abandoning their son in his moment of healing and in his moment of need.

They had been intimidated and were ashamed to be associated with a healer, if it meant being shunned by their community. There was no courage in these parents. Only cowardice. Like Pilate, they had washed their hands.

I weep for the healed man. Imagine how isolated he feels now. Not even his own parents are willing to stand up for him and say what they know to be true—“Our son was healed by Jesus.” He has been abandoned by his parents, his neighbors and his own community. I thought this was a healing story...

But the religious authorities are not finished. They bring the healed man back for yet another round of grilling. It gets ugly. Here in Act 5, they try to corner the man, trip him up on his own arguments. Even their righteous words have a double edge. So, when they say, “Give God the glory,” they really mean, “Tell us what we want to hear.”

And the man utters that sentence that has become the hymn to Amazing Grace: “I once was blind, but now I see.” And of course today, when we sing that hymn our eyes grow misty with the emotion of that transforming moment. But when the religious authorities heard him say that, their eyes blazed with the fire of anger. “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” they query. And now tempers have flared all around. The healed man has himself lost patience with the religious authorities. And a biting exchange takes place. In the end, the blind man is driven out of the temple—excommunicated from the church.

Are we still reading a healing story? Remember, this blind man didn't even ask to be healed. He simply encountered Jesus.

It's hard to believe that the good news has enemies. But we know that's true, even if we wish it were otherwise. And sadly, some of the enemies of good news come from the religious community itself. That's not only sad; it's confusing to those who think Christian faith should make people more understanding, more compassionate, more forgiving, more merciful, more just.

This story reminds me way too much of what is still happening in our society and in our church.

Is this story really 2000 years old?

As another example, think about the way that people blame poor people for their poverty, as though they reveled in their deprivation and delighted in their inability to feed themselves and their families. We call them lazy. We make life tougher for them with our public policies. Affluent communities find ways to keep them from living in their neighborhoods and oppose efforts to build affordable housing that might shave some equity off the top of our sky-high housing values.

Or how about the way that those both inside and outside the church are quick to blame and shun victims of rape, incest, or domestic violence.

How blind we are! And how blind we have been.

But as this story makes clear, “sight and blindness are not defined by one’s physical sight, but by one’s openness to the revelation of God in Jesus.”²

In the final act, Jesus is back. And why does Jesus return? Well, the text says that he had heard that the religious authorities had driven the healed man out of the synagogue. Wow! Did you hear that when the story was read earlier? Jesus returned to visit with the marginalized man, the one whom everyone else had rejected.

That’s compassion at its deepest. That’s the core meaning of God’s incarnation – God’s coming to us in human form. Not to celebrate our inhumanity to one another. Not to affirm the power structures that oppress and degrade. Not to lift up the mighty, the rich and the famous. But to bring light to those who walk in darkness, to lift the downtrodden, to free the oppressed, to suffer with those who suffer, to weep with those who weep – and to remind us all of why we have been put here on earth: to live together in peace and unity, celebrating our humanity in all its brokenness and all its glory.

The healed man understood this—literally, he saw it. And when Jesus met him again, after all he had been through, the healed man put two and two together, and placed his faith in Jesus because he understood—he saw—that Jesus was the one who

² *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, Special Note, (AbingdonPress: Nashville, 2003) p. 1928.

has come to make us fully human, in God's own image, as we were created. He once was blind, but now he sees.

And what about the religious authorities? What about those who thought they could see? Jesus judges them. We don't like to hear the word "judgment," but it's there. Jesus judges them. And what it means is this: what we think and what we do in this life matters. It matters to God, and it matters to the world—to our families, our neighbors, our communities. Jesus wants those who are in authority to have a sense of humility, to lose their arrogance, to see others as God sees them, to treat them as Jesus treats them.

This story is not only a story of healing; it is, even more, a story of revelation—the revelation of God and God's purposes. Without Christ's light, we are blind to the wonder of God's amazing grace here in our midst. If we want to understand what life is all about, we need to open ourselves to the light that God has brought to us in Jesus Christ.

Pray for more light: for you, for me, for our church, and for the world.