

17 November 2019

Jesus Meets a Seeing Man

John 9:1-38

One more “Faith Encounter with the Christ” from the Gospel of John. This week’s is a long story, but every word is worth hearing. We read John 9, verses 1-38.

⁹ As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ³Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.

⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes,

⁷saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The 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?’ ⁹Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’

¹⁰But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ ¹¹He 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.’ ¹²They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then 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.’ ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’

¹⁸The 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 ¹⁹and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’ ²⁰His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’ ²²His 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.

²³Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’

²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, ‘Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.’ ²⁵He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ ²⁶They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ ²⁷He 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?’ ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are

disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from. ³⁰The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing. ³⁴They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' ³⁶He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' ³⁷Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' ³⁸He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshiped him.

For the last month we've been looking at stories from the Gospel of John, and we've examined three different one-on-one encounters that people had with Jesus. These conversations are linked thematically, I've argued, by all representing a different response to Jesus. Taken together, they represent a sort of Laboratory of Faith, asking the question: What sort of person, under what conditions, will encounter Jesus and believe?

Before we look at today's story, I want to review the story we looked at last week, because . . . well, you'll understand. Last week Jesus met a man who had a long-standing physical affliction that prevented him from walking. The man was beside a pool in Jerusalem where, legend had it, sometimes people were healed. Jesus asked him if he wanted to be made well, and the man responded by complaining about how no one ever helped him, so he couldn't get into the healing pool. Jesus then healed him, not with a magic pool but with a word, and the man got up and walked away. He didn't say thank you, didn't even bother to ask Jesus' name. Well, as it happened, this healing took place on the Sabbath, and when the religious authorities of Jerusalem saw the man carrying his sleeping mat, they accused him of doing labor on the Sabbath. The man swore it wasn't his fault – some guy whose name he didn't know had healed him and *made* him carry the bed. Later, when he met Jesus again, he hurried back to the religious leaders to rat him out. You see why I wanted to cover that story again? This story and today's story are like a matched set: in both, there is a man with a long-time affliction, a pool in Jerusalem, a healing initiated by Jesus, which was on the Sabbath, which led to a controversy with religious leaders. And yet, what a different story we have today!

So let's walk back through the story of John 9. It begins with a theological question. Jesus' disciples see a blind beggar, whom they apparently know has been blind his whole life, and they ask whose sin was being punished by this man's blindness. I've preached about this before, so I won't go into great detail here, but it was common in that day (as it is common in ours) for people to assume that bad things that happen are a punishment from heaven. Jesus rejects this theory. All of us are born for the same reason, he says: to bring glory to God by growing into the image of God's love. Physical differences – age, size, color, sexuality, ability, gender – are irrelevant. What matters is whether we represent God. Then Jesus turns to the blind man and heals him.

There's an interesting difference here between this story and its companion. For the Lame Man, Jesus just spoke and the man was healed. This time he goes through a complicated process involving making mud from his own spit, spreading the mud on the man's eyes, then telling the man to go down to the Pool of Siloam and wash off the mud. This time the healing depends partly on the Blind Man doing what he's told. Maybe this isn't that significant – maybe the difference is only because the Blind Man could walk and the Lame Man couldn't – but the Blind Man does what Jesus asks without question, and when he has washed, he is healed. He can see.

The people of Jerusalem can't believe it. Literally. They wonder who this guy is who looks just like the Blind Man they've been stepping over in the streets his whole life. The Seeing Man says, "No, it's me. I've been healed. Jesus sent me here to wash, and now I can see." (Notice, by the way, that the Seeing Man knows Jesus' name. Apparently, he was paying attention to something other than himself.) Immediately, though, the Seeing Man is embroiled in controversy, because once again, Jesus has healed someone on a Sabbath. Some Pharisees question the Seeing Man and hear the whole making-mud-of-spittle thing and cry, "That's working the earth! You can't do that on the Sabbath! This man's a sinner!" Now, to be fair, there are a few Pharisees who say, "Are you sure that's where we want to go with this? The man did just heal a blind man." So they turn to the Seeing Man and ask, "What do you think of the man who healed you?"

"I think he's a prophet."

Now the Pharisees wonder if maybe this is all a trick. Maybe the guy's a plant, who was just pretending to be blind. Maybe Jesus was behind the whole plot. So they summon the man's parents. "Is this your son? If so, how is it that he can see now?" They reply, "This . . . is our son, yes. But we don't know how he can see. This is new to us, too. Have you asked him?" The Pharisees go back to the Seeing Man, who by now are determined to discredit Jesus by whatever means possible. "All right, mister, you better come clean now. We know this man Jesus is a sinner." The Seeing Man doesn't back down. He looks the most powerful leaders in Judaism in the eye and says, "I don't know anything about that. All I know is that I used to be blind, and now I'm not." The Pharisees demand, "Tell us how he did that!"

"I already did! Weren't listening? Want me to go through it again so you can take notes and become his disciples?"

"Hush! You're his disciple, maybe, but we're disciples of Moses! We know that Moses came from God, but we don't know where this man is from!"

"Well, isn't that amazing? Here's this man doing something that no one has ever done before – giving sight to someone who has never seen – a thing that no one could do without the power of God, and here you are, the God experts, and you don't have a clue what happened."

"How dare you lecture us! You're a man born in sin! Get out of here!"

And so the Seeing Man leaves, to wander streets he has known his whole life but that he was seeing for the first time, and as he walks, a man steps up beside him. The stranger says, “I have a question for you: Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

The Seeing Man knew that voice. He turned to face Jesus. “You just show me where he is, sir, so I can.”

“You’re looking at him.”

And the man believed.

So what does this story – really all the four stories we’ve looked at – teach us about faith? First of all, they teach us that faith isn’t an event; it’s a living, growing thing. It may start small, maybe with something that barely counts as faith, but that can grow. In our four stories, the two examples of faith are the Samaritan Woman at the well and today’s Seeing Man, and for both of them belief was a process. It began when Jesus reached out to them, but then they had to respond. The woman did so by engaging Jesus in conversation, and sticking to her questions even when the conversation got personal. The Seeing Man responded by taking a chance that the stranger who smeared mud on his eyes and sent him to wash was telling the truth. Faith starts with Christ reaching out to us – we call that grace – but it asks something from us as well. We have to recognize that we have encountered something remarkable that we want to hold on to, and we have reach out for it. Not everyone does. The Lame Man had first-hand experience of Jesus’ healing power, and even that wasn’t enough to make him curious. He was too focused on himself to want to know more about someone else. But the Samaritan Woman and the Seeing Man responded, and as they inquired more closely, their understanding of Jesus grew until, by the end, though, the Samaritan Woman recognized he was the Messiah, and the Seeing Man that he was the Son of Man.

There are Christians who see salvation – “coming to know Christ” – as a thing you do one time. Maybe at a revival meeting or a youth convo or in a personal witnessing situation. Generally it involves tears. However, it happens, though, it’s one and done. Now you’ve found Jesus. And I’ll be the first to admit that there is power in having a conversion experience you can hold on to. But John seems to tell us that faith isn’t *coming* to know Christ. It’s *getting* to know Christ. You see the difference? The former is making an acquaintance; the latter is making friends.

And then, this genuine, growing faith results in action. In the story of the Samaritan Woman at the well, we saw her drop everything and run to tell the rest of her town that she had just met the Messiah. As for the Seeing Man, he didn’t just bear witness to Christ, he stood his ground before anger and prejudice and the prospect of being excluded from the synagogue, separated from his own people, but he did it. He was not going to deny what had happened to him. In John, faith is not just being a fan of Jesus. Anyone can be a fan, but faith is putting yourself on the line for him, even when it may cost you.

Sometimes people ask me how Methodist teaching differs from what other Christians teach. This is a fair question, because our distinctions aren't obvious. Lutherans have Salvation by Grace as their signature doctrine. Baptists dunk people, and not babies. Pentecostals have the Gifts of the Spirit. What sets us apart? It's this. Faith is not an event but a journey. God is with us from the beginning, guiding us toward the moment when we choose to believe; God meets us individually when and where we are ready; and then God takes our hands and walks with us in growing friendship through all the rest of our lives. This is the salvation that we teach, but we didn't make it up. This is what the Gospel of John teaches, too. The Gospel concludes in chapter 20 by saying, "These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God," and this is the faith it's calling us to: not a thing that happens once but a relationship that keeps on growing and deepening now and forever.