

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Let me say a couple of things about this Gospel lesson. What lies behind the lesson is the struggle that was going on between faithful Jewish people who were beginning to follow Christ and found themselves in conflict with what was religiously accepted throughout the synagogues and in the temple. So you get the tension that was going on beneath this Gospel reading. We might want to think that it was the terrible Pharisees versus the good Christians. But really, the story is about well intentioned people, each and every one of them, who are very concerned to be God's people and do it just the right way. They are very concerned about the consequences of stepping outside the boundaries and incurring God's wrath and punishment. If you think about it and put that into the background you will find that we don't have to go very far at all to find the self same things happening amongst ourselves.

I have a little story here to share with you and it might help to make things a little clearer. You see, Gerald Holden was a really good friend of mine, back when I was around 12 or 13 years old. It was an unusual friendship indeed, because it was really a friendship that wasn't allowed. You see our town was deeply divided between Roman Catholics and Protestants, and Gerald was a Roman Catholic and I was a Protestant and we struck up a friendship together. We had a wonderful time until I was around 12 or 13 one summer afternoon we were sitting ideally chatting when we starting to talk about whose faith was right and whose faith was wrong and whether it was the minister or the priest that knew the truth, and which church was best. We finished up yelling and fighting and crying. Gerald ran home in tears, and I ran inside into to my house in tears, never to see or speak to Gerald again. It is one of the most painful memories that I have and that was really a rotten day.

It might be said that this particular Sabbath we read about in the Gospel was a particularly rotten day also for Jesus and the disciples. They'd been at the Temple, presumably they had been worshipping and presumably they had been talking about their faith, as they understood it, along with its common features and its difficulties, but like so many, the discussion with Jesus turned into something nasty and mean and he was able to get out of there before they stoned him. As he and the disciples walked away, they happened to notice a blind man. The disciples begin to wonder about the cause of his blindness. And, here we are right up to the present day. What terrible sin had this man done, or who in his family had done such a terrible sin that God would punish him by not even letting him see when he was born. Whoever was at fault, the disciples were absolutely certain that such blindness was punishment for his sin.

We haven't come very far from there in 2008, have we? Jesus will have none of it. What Jesus sees is an opportunity to demonstrate to the disciples the complete power which God has worked, and works, in and through Him. "It was," Jesus said to the disciples, "a grand opportunity to show how He was the light of the world." Then, without so much as a request from the blind man, or a word of consent from the blind man, Jesus makes mud with his saliva and plasters the mix on the man's eyes and tells him to go take a bath in the pool of Siloam. The man did, and returned, and he had received his sight. Alleluia!!

You would think there would be a great celebration. No way. We might forget that it was the Sabbath, but the people of the time didn't. We might not see any problems in healing someone on the Sabbath, but it was a major issue for the religious authorities and the people of the day, because, it meant getting thrown out of the temple and being ostracized from society. Jesus had broken the Sabbath rule. He failed to keep it holy by restoring the man's sight. But, things were worse than that.

There was also the burning question, of where he got the power to do what he had done. Surely he had broken God's laws so the power didn't come from God, did it? The only other place the power could have come from was surely that he was in cahoots with the devil. So the cat was among the pigeons and every darned one of them was off down off the perch in no time at all. And almost without knowing it, we find ourselves in the middle of them.

First, we need to notice that Jesus puts an end to any notion that God punishes sin by afflicting people with disease or illness. Instead, we are invited to see an illness, even that which is the most devastating of its kind, as any opportunity for God to reveal to us His light, His compassion, His grace, His forgiveness, and His power. Not necessarily by granting healing, but by giving the ill, and the suffering, his full presence and power and strength, that they might live gracefully in and through such illness, even onto death, when with the power of the Father, they will be raised again.

Second, we are immediately introduced to a form of blindness that has nothing to do with eyesight, but everything to do with people believing one knows exactly what is right and what is wrong with the world, and dares to try to apply it to everybody else. The man's sight is restored and Jesus and the disciples vanish out of the story. Immediately the search for cause and blame rages among the man's friends, neighbors, and family, and the religious authorities who will not accept this healing on Jesus terms. It is here we see clearly revealed that second, and much more deadly, form of blindness. The conviction that one knows and one knows best! And, that one knows what God wants and one absolutely knows what God requires, not only of self but of everyone else.

It's just like the story of the two blind men who had been healed by Jesus, who happened to meet one day. Both of them had been healed by Jesus. Each was so excited to meet the other who had been healed. They talked of the wonder of sight, the color of flowers, the glory of sunrises, and the faces of children and grandchildren. They were laughing and having a great time together, when one of them said, "And do you remember how Jesus took that mud, spit on it, and put it onto your eye?" The other fellow looked at him, stunned and shocked, and said "Why, no, He simply said 'Receive your sight,' and I could see." The first fellow said, "Wait a minute, now just wait a minute here. You mean he didn't use any mud?" "No." "Well didn't he at least tell you to go bathe in the pool of Siloam?" "No, of course not, whoever heard of anything as ridiculous as mud in your eye?!" "Well," said the first man, "if he didn't put on your eyes, and you didn't have to wash in the pool of Siloam, then you are still blind! Blind—do you hear me. Because that's the way Jesus healed me; that's the way he does it!" Then the second man began to get angry. He shouted, "Mud, mud, mud! Whoever heard of using mud?! That's the dumbest thing I have ever heard! You still have mud in your eyes. You're the one who's still blind!" They got into a big argument, their relationship was destroyed, and right then and there, they formed the first two denominations: The Mudites and the Antimudies!

Since then, of course, the church as been fighting and splitting over issues, not a whole lot more significant than that! So it is that we find the healed man back home in his neighborhood, but not at

all happy and not in the least bit comfortable, even though now he can see. Friends and neighbors are troubled that he is no longer blind. He is bombarded with questions. Who did it? How? Where's the healer now? Arguments broke among those who believed the man was healed, and those who did not; there is no joy, no praise, no thanksgiving, no encouragement. Just quarreling, separation and division, hard hearts and destroyed feelings. Then the poor fellow was hauled before the religious authorities. After all, the healing was on the Sabbath, and therefore, the healer, if there was one, had broken God's Law and should be punished. But the clergy are divided also, and so the healed man is asked to come and give testimony.

He calls Jesus a prophet of God and his testimony is rejected and further evidence is sought. The authorities next interrogate the parents. They are intimidated and afraid of punishment, because they might be seen as having condoned this Sabbath breaking lawlessness and they asked not to be involved less they be thrown out of the synagogue and society. The religious authorities drag back the man who has been healed. Pressures build and tempers flare. The man testifies that he was blind and now he has his sight. He argues that only someone with the power and approval of God could accomplish such a healing. That was not a good strategy. The religious authorities were infuriated. Either they had to accept the man as healed, and accept the healer as a person of God, or they must hold to their view of the law concerning the Sabbath and reject both the healed and the healer. They chose to reject the healer and, for good measure, excommunicate the healed man and throw him out of the temple. And, he never asked to be healed in the first place!

The point, beloved, is take care; the good news always has enemies. When Jesus re-enters the story, the healed man meets Him and confesses His faith in Jesus. Suddenly it becomes painfully clear who the ones are that are coming under judgment, and the healed man is not one of them. The healing has made it clear: light comes to those who recognize that life is blindness without Christ; darkness comes to those who without Christ claim to see.

There is an epitaph on a gravestone, in an old churchyard in London, that reads:

John Newton, Clerk
"Once an infidel and libertine,
A servant of slaves in Africa,
Was by the rich mercy of our
Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,
Preserved, restored, pardoned,
And appointed to preach the Faith
He had long laboured to destroy,
Near 16 years at Olney, in Bucks
And years in this church."

After being impressed into service in the Royal Navy, John Newton, at his own request, was transferred to serve on a slave ship which took him to the coast of Sierra Leone. He ultimately became the captain of his own ship, and was very actively involved in the slave trade. However, on a homeward voyage, while attempting to steer the ship through a violent storm, he experienced what he was to refer to later as his "great deliverance." He recorded in his journal that when all seemed lost, and the ship would surely sink, he exclaimed, "Lord, have mercy upon us." Later in his cabin he

reflected on what he said, and he began to believe that God had addressed him through the storm, and that grace had begun to work for him.

The storm had not come as punishment, but as an opportunity to reveal the power, the presence, and the compassion of God. Like the blind man who received his sight, it took time for John Newton to fully realize what was happening to him. He eventually became an Episcopalian priest and he wrote many hymns, one of which has become a favorite around the world, "Amazing Grace." Do you remember the first verse? I want you to think about the last line of the first verse and if you have some courage, I want you to sing the verse with me.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me. . .
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now, I see.*

Amen.