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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”



BIBLE STUDY John 9

As we look into John 9, something becomes evident. The story is becoming redundant to a degree. We see the same sort of incidents playing out time after time. Jesus says or does something. The Pharisees use what He has said or done to try and make a case against Jesus. Jesus tries to enlighten them in some fashion. They don't get it, but a few do. Jesus uses the material to try to illustrate the spiritual.

Yet while this is true, we also see that there are nuances that set each incident apart. For example here, we see a twist on the subject of sin. We also see that the confrontation here doesn't take place between Jesus and the Pharisees. The confrontation occurs between the Pharisees and the man Jesus heals. A slight difference from what we've seen before, and a contrast to what we saw in Chapter 8. Jesus stood up for the woman caught in adultery while no one stood up for Him. Here, Jesus isn't present, and someone finally takes up for Him in the face of the pressure of the Jewish leadership.

The beginning of this chapter starts with a healing, and an important clarification. The man blind from birth is healed and the question offered as to whose sin was responsible for His affliction. Jesus responds that it was no one's sin, but that the condition simply helped to make the glory of God known. This is a significant statement as even today Christians still carry this idea that if something bad happens, it must be attached to wrongdoing on the part of the person afflicted. Yet here we see that this isn't necessarily true.

I would argue that this idea applies not only to physical affliction, but even to mental, emotional, and relational as well. Yes, there are times when we bring bad things on ourselves, but it isn't a formula that applies 100% of the time. Sometimes it's circumstance, wrong place at the wrong time, or the sin of another that causes the issue. Even still, in the midst of the situation, the glory of God can and many times does make itself known. It evidences itself through healing, community, and the love of God displayed in miracles of substance or miracles of the heart. It is simply not always accurate, and oftentimes outright cruel, to automatically blame someone's situation on their sin, especially if we have no idea about their circumstances.

The idea, though, continues in different strains of Christianity. It is one of the aspects of the faith that alienates many because it presumes that we are able to stand in judgment of another. Often the more fundamentalist or dogmatic the tradition, the more likely it is to render judgment on those who don't toe the line offered by the church leadership. A corner on the truth leads to a new legalism of rules and beliefs that are assumed to be the only way to be a "genuine" Christian. If one doesn't agree, one isn't one of the faithful. The result may be anything from being pushed a bit to the fringe to outright shaming and exclusion.

The arrogance of the Pharisees isn't limited to the Pharisees. If our hearts aren't guarded from the temptation to see ourselves as better than others we can fall into the same temptation. If our hearts aren't humbled to recognize that our limited humanity can never fully grasp God's infinite grace, goodness, and love, we can fall into the same temptation.

We see how this plays out when they seek out the man's parents to confirm that he was, indeed, blind from birth. When questioned, they push off the answer on their handicapped (now cured) son because he was "of age" to answer for himself. Scripture reveals that in reality they were skating the question because they were afraid of the ramifications if they answered. They were in fear that an honest response would lead them to be excluded from the synagogue. This begs the question, whether a synagogue or a church, why would anyone want to be part of a community of faith that rewards honesty with exclusion?

The criticism of Jesus we've seen before. He's healed on the Sabbath. Remember, this occurred before with the man at the pool of Bethesda who couldn't get himself into the waters to be healed. The Pharisees accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath law. Jesus in this moment replies to their hypocrisy that they will perform circumcision on the Sabbath, and elsewhere in the gospels that they will care for an animal on the Sabbath, yet will accuse the compassionate healing of a person. Here they don't accuse Him to His face, but rather do so when the blind man reveals it was Jesus who did the healing.

A point that matters here is the difference between objecting to a rule itself or the misuse of a rule. Jesus is not objecting to the concept of the Sabbath. This was a commandment handed down by Moses and observed even during the Exodus. When the manna came down they were told to gather twice as much as normal the day before the Sabbath so they wouldn't have to work. The Sabbath is still a good observance and necessary for both worship and rest.

The objection is to the misuse of the rule. The objection is to the hypocrisy surrounding their criticism of Him while turning a blind eye to their own “work” done on that same holy day. This may seem like splitting hairs. It is significant. There are always exceptions to rules, particularly when weighing the necessity of a rule against a calling or act of mercy. Holding this tension is what helps us hold to valuable disciplines and expectations while at the same time offering freely the love of Christ. Throwing out one or the other leads to a lopsided faith that has deficits in both understanding and practice.

When asked about the nature of Jesus, the blind man replies that He is a prophet. This makes perfect sense given his tradition and background. As Jewish man, what other conclusion would he draw? Jesus performs a healing miracle on him. This very much seems to put Him in that category. The Pharisees, on the other hand seek to discredit the claim, disbelieving the condition that had been healed.

Sadly, this response isn’t just a “there and then” incident. When people in power feel threatened and set their mind to eradicate that threat, all bets are off. The “rules” don’t matter. They can twist and break whatever ones they want, innocent in their own eyes when the ends justify the means. They can also, in their own eyes, twist the rules so that even an innocent action becomes grounds for accusation and punishment. This is what has been happening with Jesus and His miracles.

Compounding this hypocrisy, a secondary step is to find a way to make it seem like a good work done was not actually a work at all. They try to expose the healing as fraudulent. In the doing they actually expose it for its authenticity. In their zeal to make Jesus seem like a phony, they prove Him to be the real deal.

What follows is a bold reaction from the healed man.

They ask him to give glory to God, and accuse Jesus of being a “sinner.” The response? “Whether He is a sinner I don’t know, all I know is I was blind and now I see.” This answer is direct and honest. It isn’t wishy washy, nor does it kowtow to the attitude of the Pharisees. He knows nothing of Jesus past nor character, all he knows is the reality of what he has experienced. His sight has been restored by this man. This is a telling moment both then and now as we look at those around us and with whom we will cast our lot.

In Chapter 8, Jesus is critical of those who refuse to believe in who He is. His works won’t convince them. His words won’t convince them. Nothing will convince them not because of His lack of genuineness, but rather their refusal to entertain anything that falls outside of their own perceptions. He doesn’t fit their mold, and perhaps more significantly threatens their ambitions. So they reject the truth. The only possible consequence of this is that if they reject truth, they embrace and propagate a lie. Jesus throws them in league with the father of lies, the devil. This isn’t just them. It’s all of us. Whomever we choose to follow either leads us to embrace the truth or a lie. We either fall into line with those who refused to embrace the way of Jesus or those who do not, which reveals whose children we truly are.

Jesus’ actions affirm Him before this man that was healed. What had the Pharisees done for this man? Had they ever taken note of him before? Had they ever offered a kind word or compassionate hand? What have they done to help improve his circumstance? I speculate the answer is nothing. Then here comes a man who in a moment puts the intent of the Law into action. To love God and love one’s neighbor as oneself. Jesus takes the time to see the man, have compassion on him, and glorify God through this healing. In that compassion, the man is won over to Jesus even to the point of defending him to those who could cause him social and perhaps even physical harm.

As they accuse Jesus by assaulting His character, the man turns their own theology on them. No one can work such a miracle but by the power of God, and they understand that God does not do such things through people who are considered “sinners”. Rather God only uses those who have authentic relationship with God and embrace genuine worship. He doesn’t back down. He paints them in the corner.

Once again, the Pharisees show their true selves. There is no answer to the logic. I would suggest that this man has used against them the very sensibility that they use to lord over the people. They are worthy to judge and so forth because of their authenticity of faith. Now here comes a man who is doing far greater things through the power of God, and their own words haunt them. Their response? They do what people painted into a corner often do, they fight. They insult the man and throw him out. That’s all they have left.

Jesus finds him, and offers him an opportunity to embrace Himself full for who He is. The Son of Man. The Messiah. And the man believes. The chapter ends with Jesus using the material miracle at the beginning of the chapter to convey a spiritual reality, which once again the Pharisees misunderstand. The blind will gain sight. Those who claim to be able to see will remain in their sin. How can this be?

The “blind” know that they don’t know. They know there are things missing in their life. There is something spiritually amiss that they are grasping to fulfill or understand. The “blindness” produces an openness to hearing and entertaining the answers to these questions. The desire to “see” outweighs all else, so when the truth and such reveal themselves there is a preparedness to receive them. We are doing our best with what we have before us, yet are humbly willing to take correction and shift our understanding where necessary when truth shows us to be off the mark.

Contrasting this are those who think they “see” clearly. This “sight” is blindness because it assumes the answers have been found and figured out. There is no need to be open, in fact openness is actually looked down upon, because it might question what we already think we know as a matter of fact. Rather than entertaining truth, even though it may truth handed down from God, old beliefs are clung to. Often they are clung to aggressively. If I think I see everything perfectly, I am truly blind to my own ignorance. Spiritually, this can be devastating because the Christ knocking at my heart is denied and rejected in favor of the comfort and convenience of clinging to what I think I already know.

This chapter is incredibly valuable. It is informative in the way it corrects the view that sin is the cause of affliction. It is cautionary in its continued revelation of what power and a desire to cling to that power and status can bring about in our character and willingness to abandon our own principles. It is inspiring in demonstrating the transforming power of God and the courage of one who will accept the glory revealed in Jesus over the comfort of knuckling under to the powers that be. It is compelling as Jesus exalts the humble, open heart willing to embrace its honest ignorance and search for truth even as He warns against a prideful assumption of having things already figured out.