

“Encounters with Jesus: Healing of Man Born Blind” John 9:1-41 6/17/12

This morning we continue our series of encounters with Jesus. So far we've watched as Jesus interacted with a good religious man (Nicodemus), an adulterous woman, and a dejected disciple (Peter). I hope you are finding these encounters to be as challenging as I am! Today we look at the healing of a blind man, a story that has implications for both physical and spiritual blindness. It also says some important things about the dangers of organized religion. I've asked Mary Miner and Bonnie to help me with the reading of John 9.

*1 As he walked along, he saw a **man blind** from **birth**.*

*2 His **disciples** asked him, "**Rabbi**, who sinned, this **man** or his parents, that he was born **blind**?"*

*3 **Jesus** answered, "Neither this **man** nor his parents sinned; he was born **blind** so that **God's** works might be revealed in him.*

*6 When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the **man's eyes**,*

*7 saying to him, "Go, wash in the **pool** of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.*

*8 The 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**?"*

*9 Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "**No**, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the **man**."*

10 But they kept asking him, "Then how were your **eyes** opened?"

11 He 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."

12 They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

13 They brought to the **Pharisees** the **man** who had formerly been **blind**.

14 Now it was a **sabbath day** when **Jesus** made the mud and opened his **eyes**.

15 Then 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."

16 Some 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.

17 So 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**."

18 The **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

19 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born **blind**? How then does he now see?"

20 His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born **blind**;

21 but 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."

24 So 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."

25 He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was **blind**, now I see."

26 They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your **eyes**?"

27 He 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**?"

28 Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his **disciple**, but we are **disciples** of **Moses**."

29 We know that **God** has spoken to **Moses**, but **as** for this **man**, we do not know where he comes from."

30 The **man** answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my **eyes**."

31 We know that **God** does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who **worships** him and obeys his will."

32 Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the **eyes** of a person born **blind**."

33 If this **man** were not from **God**, he could do nothing."

34 *They answered him, "You were born entirely in **sins**, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.*

35 ***Jesus** heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of **Man**?"*

36 *He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."*

37 ***Jesus** said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."*

38 *He said, "**Lord**, I believe." And he worshiped him.*

39 ***Jesus** said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become **blind**."*

40 *Some of the **Pharisees** near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not **blind**, are we?"*

41 ***Jesus** said to them, "If you were **blind**, you would not have **sin**. But now that you say, "We see,' your **sin** remains. (John 9:1-41)*

One of the ironies that we find in these stories of Jesus is that often the religious leaders are portrayed as spiritually blind- Jesus calls them "blind guides" elsewhere. He sees tremendous dangers in the religion of his day. He condemns the attitudes and practices of religious leaders, while he often commends common, everyday non-religious sinners! Jesus can be surprising that way! But I wonder if Jesus has the same opinion about religious people today. What do you think? The story demonstrates

several characteristics of dangerous religion, which can help us examine our own hearts as well as the practices of the church today.

First of all, the very religious Pharisees in this story were arrogant. The majority of them assumed that they had it all figured out, that they knew with certainty how things were supposed to work, what God could do and couldn't do and why. Anything that fell outside of their system of thinking must be wrong. I'm reminded of an old "Frank and Ernest" comic. The two of them are looking at a list of the seven deadly sins printed on a blackboard. You know- anger, envy, covetousness, gluttony, lust, sloth, and pride. Frank says to Ernest, "After you've successfully resisted the other six deadly sins, it's really hard not to be proud."

I think that was the dilemma of the Pharisees. Believing that keeping the law was God's central requirement for us, they specialized in interpreting the Old Testament law by specifying in great detail what was and was not acceptable behavior. They made rules. For example, they had developed over 600 rules defining what it meant to "keep the Sabbath!" In our story, Jesus broke several of those rules. He made mud- which was regarded as work- and work was forbidden on the Sabbath. And he healed someone on the Sabbath. Healing on the Sabbath was only permitted if the person was dying. I'm not making this up! Being a good religious person meant following the law along with all of their rules. But as Frank and Ernest pointed out, if religion is defined as keeping rules, falling into

pride is almost inevitable for those who succeed. And religion that lacks humility can be a dangerous thing.

Pride and arrogance lead to spiritual blindness. In our story, the Pharisees had good testimony from several witnesses that God had done a wonderful thing in their midst. But because of their obsession with their rules, and their arrogance that God can only work in certain ways, they were unable to see what God had done. That led to horrible conclusions and decisions on their part. Innocent people were frightened and maligned. God's good work went unrecognized. Arrogance and spiritual blindness are dangerous. We may do well to follow the example of Kevin Sharer, the CEO of Amgen Corporation, who keeps a portrait of George Custer in his office as a reminder of the danger of overestimating your own knowledge and abilities. We need constant reminders to stay humble.

Second, the Pharisees were judgmental. They were quick to judge the hearts of others. "He must be a sinner," they said about Jesus, because he broke their Sabbath rules. Religious people today can be judgmental, too, can't they? I attended a fundamentalist church growing up that forbade smoking, drinking, and dancing. We sometimes jokingly quoted the unofficial motto of guys at the ultra-conservative Bob Jones University. "We don't smoke or drink or chew. And we don't go with girls who do!" People who took part in any of those activities were judged to be unspiritual, regardless of how they lived the rest of their lives. They could

have been the most loving, compassionate, courageous Christians around, but if they broke those rules they were seriously suspect. We were judgmental. And it was wrong.

But liberal Christians can be judgmental, too. They may look askance at anyone who favors restrictions on abortion or gay ordination or environmental protections. The problem with being judgmental is that we are putting ourselves in the role reserved for God. Regardless of what we believe about an issue, we simply cannot know the heart and motives of another person. That is a temptation for many of us and has become a habit for some of us. The Pharisees were judgmental. Are you? Am I?

A number of years ago a grocery store clerk wrote to advice-columnist Ann Landers to complain about people she had seen buy luxury food items- like birthday cakes and sodas- with their food stamps. The writer ranted that she thought all those people on welfare who treated themselves to such non-necessities were “lazy and wasteful.” A few weeks later Lander’s column was devoted entirely to people who had responded to the grocery clerk. Here’s my favorite response.

“I’m the woman who bought the cake and paid for it with food stamps. I thought the check-out woman in the store would burn a hole through me with her eyes. What she didn’t know is that cake is for my little girl’s birthday. It will be her last. She has bone cancer and will probably be gone within six to eight months.” Jesus forbids us to judge others. There

are good reasons for that. We simply don't know enough to make those judgments. Dangerous religion judges the hearts and motives of others. Do you? Do I?

Finally, the Pharisees were perspective-challenged. (I made that word up!) They focused on small matters, like their 600 rules about the Sabbath, and totally missed the big things God was doing- like Jesus giving a whole new life to this blind man. In those days there was no work a blind man could do, so he was inevitably reduced to begging. And, he was unlikely to marry, because he couldn't support a wife and family. Jesus' miracle had completely transformed his life! But the Pharisees lacked the ability to see the big picture. They were spiritually blind.

I'm reminded of the story of the Wright brother's first successful flight. On Dec. 17, 1903, their powered airplane successfully flew for 59 seconds. They rushed a telegram to their sister in their hometown of Dayton, Ohio. It read, "First sustained flight today... fifty-nine seconds... Hope to be home by Christmas." Their sister, excited by her brothers' success, rushed to the newspaper office and gave the telegram to the editor. The next morning, in bold letters, the newspaper headline read, "Popular Local Bicycle Merchants to be Home for Holidays." Really! The editor lacked any perspective on what had happened and missed the main point.

That was the Pharisees! And sometimes it's us. After a mission trip where kids did amazing work for people in desperate need, I heard an adult

focus on the fact that the kids broke some tools and left a car dirty. Sure, kids can improve in some areas, but where was our sense of perspective? God had just done a wonderful thing in and through those kids! Let's show a little grace to one another and those around us.

Organized religion can be dangerous. Jesus knew it and was openly critical of it. Its self-righteousness can lead it to be arrogant, judgmental, and unable to see and participate in what God is doing. I hope that doesn't describe you or me, and I hope that doesn't describe GPC. If it does, this is an opportunity to turn away from that kind of thing. To repent of it. May God deliver us from the dangers of organized religion.