

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 19, 2023
10am

Text: John 9:1-41 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

*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*

Those words were written by the English minister John Newton in 1772.¹ Newton's faith journey reads like an adventure novel. As a young man he was forced into service in the Royal Navy, where he was frequently punished for insubordination. At one point he tried to desert and was stripped to his waist, tied to a grating, and flogged. He was then traded as crew for a slave ship bound for West Africa. Not long after, the ship's captain grew fed up with Newton and marooned him with the Sherbro people of Sierra Leone, who enslaved him on a plantation. Eventually he was rescued by a merchant ship traveling back to England. It was during that voyage that Newton found the beginnings of God's grace. The ship was caught in a terrible storm and was rapidly taking on water. Newton prayed to God for mercy, and not long after the storm died down. The ship made it safely to shore and Newton dedicated himself to studying the Bible.

Still, his conversion to Christianity was slow. Despite his own experience as a slave, he continued working in the slave trade, investing in and captaining several slave ships. It was not until his friend, John Wesley, encouraged him to enter the ministry that Newton finally left the slave trade behind. Over the next thirty years he repented of his role in perpetuating slavery, became a committed abolitionist, and penned "Amazing Grace" – his spiritual autobiography.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazing_Grace

When writing “Amazing Grace,” Newton drew inspiration from our Scripture lesson. He uses blindness as a metaphor for life before we are converted to the Gospel. But conversion is not a singular moment. As Methodists we believe that there is indeed a point of decision in each of our lives when we are convicted of the wretchedness of our sin. We realize how weak we are and how desperately we need Jesus. As the hymn goes, we were lost in our sins, but God’s grace found us. In the *ordo salutis* – the order of salvation – we call this moment justifying grace. But this moment is just the beginning, because we also believe that the work of grace is a lifelong, sanctifying (perfecting) process – the work of God healing our spiritual blindness and opening our eyes to the fullness of the Gospel.

Like all biblical stories depicting disability and illness, we need to be careful what conclusions we draw from this story of Jesus giving sight to a blind man. The prevailing belief in Jesus’ time was that disability and illness was a result of sin; this is why the disciples want to know whose sin caused the man’s blindness. But Jesus rejects that belief. “No one sinned,” he says (v. 3).

We are often tempted, like the disciples, to draw bad theological conclusions when someone is disabled or ill. The spiritual platitudes abound: “God is testing your faith,” “God will not give you more than you can handle,” “This is your cross to bear,” etc...

Friends, if you are in the habit of thinking and saying these things, please stop. Disability and illness are complicated, deeply personal experiences that cannot be reduced to or resolved by trite spiritual sayings. We mostly say these things to comfort ourselves in the face of uncomfortable realities. I once met a man in a wheelchair. He remarked that he was tired of people telling him that he would one day walk in heaven. “That’s their vision of heaven,” he said. “In my heaven, I will still have my wheelchair. This is my body, made in the image of God. I do not need to be healed of anything.”

That was his truth. Another person with the same disability may feel differently and long to walk in this life or the next. The point is that we let disabled and ill people speak for themselves and decide what *they* believe about *their* disability or illness. We should take a cue from Jesus and not theologize on their behalf. Jesus does not entertain the disciples’ bad theology. Instead, he declares that this man will do the work of God.

And what is God's work in this story? It is not, in fact, the miraculous healing that is about to happen. Jesus does not give this man sight because he thinks he is less whole without it. Jesus gives him sight because he has suffered immensely at the hands of a community that wrongly believes his disability is a punishment from God. Jesus gives this man his sight to heal him from a stigma that has stripped him of his dignity and forced him to the margins of society.

But like most things that Jesus does, this miracle is not for the man alone. Jesus also gives him his sight to demonstrate to the man's neighbors that the *real* problem is their *spiritual blindness* – a blindness that has oppressed and excluded this man his entire life. *That* is the true blindness Jesus has come to heal. And Jesus will heal by upending the status quo. He takes mud, mixes it with his saliva, spreads it on the man's eyes and says, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (vv. 6-7). The name 'Siloam' means 'sent.' This miracle is a commissioning. The blessing with mud and water echoes our baptisms, where we are called and sent as disciples. Jesus calls this man forth from the margins of his community, blesses him, and then sends him out as a witness of God's inbreaking kingdom. Just like the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus has anointed yet another unlikely evangelist. By redeeming this man from his community's oppressive beliefs, he demonstrates the disruptive grace of God's kingdom.

Let's pause and consider on this: Here we have a man, born blind, now miraculously able to see – and no one is celebrating! No one gives God glory! The neighbors demand proof that he is the same man they once knew. The Pharisees are incensed that Jesus broke the law by healing on the Sabbath; they call Jesus a sinner and declare this man's miracle heresy. Even his parents are disappointing – they are so afraid of angering the Pharisees, they refuse to share in their son's joy.

How sad for this man, for God has transformed his life, and no one sees it. How sad for his community, willfully blind to the miracle in their midst. And how sad for us. Because too often we are just like the people in this story. Too often we are so invested in the status quo that we fail to see the new and beautiful thing that God is doing. And if the eyes of our spirits are screwed shut against God's light, how can we possibly do God's work?

One commentator summarized the message of this story thus: “When we have constructed a reality or idea that we have made to be ‘the truth,’ we will protect it all costs – even as God breaks into it to speak real truth.”²

That fear of disruption, of God dismantling what we believe to be true, is the wilderness we acknowledge today. It is different than the wilderness of unknowing, where we find freedom in accepting mystery. The wilderness of disruption is where we are confronted with the sins of our pride, judgment, ignorance, privilege, and need to control people and outcomes. In this wilderness, the Spirit calls us to grapple with our idolization of the status quo. Who benefits from the way things are, the way things have always been? And who suffers? Usually when we are clinging to the status quo, it is because it benefits us, even as it harms the neighbors we are called to love.

But the Spirit is a disruptive force. Like Jesus taught Nicodemus, the Spirit blows where she wills. Part of growing in our knowledge of the Gospel is asking the Spirit to remove our blind spots and show us where our beliefs have gone astray. We cannot be afraid of finding out we were wrong, otherwise we miss out on new perspectives that awaken us to a fuller knowledge of God’s love.

God sent Jesus to disrupt, confound, turn upside down and inside out the perceptions and assumptions of his time, and the Spirit continues that work among us today. The Spirit disrupts, confounds, convicts, and humbles – all so that we can have the opportunity to repent of our wrong beliefs and see more clearly the Good News that is unfolding all around us. This is the long process of conversion, of the Spirit converting our perspective to God’s perspective. We call this process grace.

The Greek word in the Bible for ‘conversion’ is *metanoia*. It literally means to change one’s mind. We treat changing our minds as a character flaw, and the Church has a history of viciously going after people whose faithful understanding dares to evolve. But this behavior is not biblical. God’s grace assumes that our spiritual vision is deficient, dimmed by sin. It is Christ’s saving work to heal our spiritual blindness and slowly open our eyes to the miracle of grace.

² <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2023-03-13/john-91-41-3/>

That healing can be a wilderness journey. It can be painful, disruptive, disorienting. But it can also be transformative if we let it.

Our artwork this Sunday is called “Siloam,” and the artist, Lisle Gwynn Garrity, writes this about healing: “When I place myself in the man’s shoes, I imagine myself receiving Jesus’ command to go—to go beyond what is familiar into territory unknown; to be an active participant in my own continual healing and transformation; to surrender myself to a death of sorts, one that forces me to submerge into God’s murky and living waters so I can once again be reborn and awoken to the world with new eyes.”³

I imagine that when John Newton was confronted with the sin of his life in the slave trade – a trade that was once very much accepted as the status quo – he, too, surrendered to a death of sorts. He changed his mind and began the slow, disruptive work of conversion to a different worldview based on the Gospel. He allowed the Spirit to lead him into the wilderness of healing, and there he found God’s grace.

*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.

³ Artist’s statement for “Siloam” by Lisle Gwynn Garrity. Inspired by John 9:1-41. Graphic image. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.