

John 9:1-12
April 3, 2011

South Plains

Seeing What We Look For
(a facsimile of this sermon)

The way John tells the story, it was almost by accident that Jesus and his disciples encountered a man born blind. "As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth." The disciples are quick to see an opportunity to show off their spiritual awareness. They ask Jesus, "Who is to blame for this man's blindness, the man himself or his parents? It's an old worry with anyone who sees suffering: we want know who's responsible, who did something wrong that resulted in this suffering? If we cannot change the sin, maybe we can learn to avoid that sin ourselves. What did he do wrong to cause his blindness?"

Jesus pours cold water on the whole idea that suffering is punishment for sin. Unfortunately, his answer does not solve the question of where evils such as blindness come from. Instead he deepens the mystery: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born so that God's works might be revealed in him." Suffering is important, but not because it's caused by sin. Suffering is important because it hurts. So, Jesus spits. That may seem impolite or even gross to us, but it has a purpose. When I cut myself, I often bring the wound to my mouth because saliva has healing properties. Jesus used spit together with dirt to make a muddy poultice that he put on

the man's eyes. Then, he told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, a special pool used for the Feast of Tabernacles. When the man did as he was told, he could see.

Ordinarily, you would think healing would be a good thing in the eyes of everybody. Not so. The man's neighbors did not see a miraculous healing. They quarrel about whether the man who now sees is the same person as the man born blind. When the man protests that he has received his sight from Jesus, his neighbors seem to lose interest in his good news and want to know where Jesus is. They can't quite believe their eyes because all they want to see is this blind beggar. Maybe they hope Jesus will explain things.

When Jesus is not available, these nosy neighbors bring the man to the Pharisees. I suppose because it was so unbelievable, they thought only a religious explanation would do. You know, faith is what's unbelievable. The religious leaders had an explanation all right. Since the healing had taken place on the Sabbath, it must not be the work of God because everybody knows godly people do not work on the Sabbath. It must be magic or sorcery. As you can imagine, not everybody was satisfied with that answer. It was after all a miracle and it healed a terrible problem for this man. So, they all turned to the man and asked what he thought about Jesus. Without hesitation he proclaims, "He is a prophet."

Well, prophets speak and act for God. To have the sort of insight into the works of God that could identify a prophet, well, that's knowledge that we religious professions like to keep for ourselves. They go to the man's parents to make sure he was in fact born blind. Once that's clear, they press the parents to tell them what they really want to know: How did the blindness go away? Some people are always looking for some other way to explain a miracle besides the work of God. The doctor cured him, or it was temporary, or the mud was really medicine. That's the opposite of always looking to explain suffering by finding out who is to blame. We explain healing by a natural process.

Some people hear this part of the story and think the parents give a cowardly answer to the question of how the healing took place. "Ask him," they say, "he's old enough to speak for himself." I think it's a cagey reply. The parents know that anything they say to imply that Jesus is the Messiah will get them kicked out of the synagogue. So they avoid answering. Pretty smart, because that's the real issue for everybody, who is Jesus?

The Pharisees are better prepared the next time they question the man. They corner him. "Either give glory to God like a faithful believer, or give the credit to this fellow Jesus whom we know is a sinner." Well, they thought they had him cornered. The man boldly says, "Honestly friends, I do not know whether Jesus is a sinner. One thing I do know that though I was blind now I

see." He stuck to what he knew for sure, what his new eyes told him was true.

Of course, those professionals weren't happy with his answer. But, when they push him for more information, the man gets a little testy. "Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Maybe he shouldn't have said so much. That little word "also" reveals that he was on the way to becoming a follower of Jesus himself. The religious leaders drive the man out of the synagogue. They were not looking for that kind of Messiah.

All this time, for 26 verses, Jesus has been absent while neighbors, parents and Pharisees try to see what cured this man of blindness without seeing Jesus. They were not looking for the works of God. It's a truism. We see what we're looking for. Finally, at the end of the chapter, Jesus discovers that the man has been tossed out of the synagogue and he comes back on the scene.

Jesus does not explain what caused the blindness in the first place, nor does he explain how he healed the man. The blindness he really wants to address is the sort that confronts a wonderful gift like the gift of sight, and yet refuses to see it as a gift from God. The disciples saw an intriguing problem: whose sin should we blame for this suffering? The neighbors saw a trick, somebody who looked like the blind beggar has changed places with him. The religious leaders saw a chance to discredit this troublesome Jesus. The parents saw

nothing but trouble. Only the man who regained his sight saw the works of God revealed in Jesus.

We see what we're looking for:
a child of God or a sinner;
a gift from God or good luck;
the blessing of Christian friends or a favor being repaid;
divine healing or cold science;
faith or foolishness;
a community of believers or a social club;
bread and juice or the body and blood of Christ.

We see what we're looking for.