

Agassiz Christian Reformed Church, May 11, 2014

It is good to be here. We have worshipped on occasion with you folks, and have appreciated doing so. We have always been warmly welcomed.

## **Introduction**

I used to have a saying on my e-mail postings:

The human walk... begins in slavery and ends in freedom, and [its] point of progress at every moment is faith. (*Faith's Freedom*, Luke Timothy Johnston). That is the shared human condition of "slavery" into which we are born. The journey we are on is towards freedom, towards *sight*, towards *Light*.

John Chapter 9 is about a man born blind from birth. The widespread assumption back then was that this was somehow the man's or the parents' fault.

But according to Jesus it was not worth speculating about. Fact is, the man was blind. Fact is, after the encounter with Jesus, the man sees. Wow! It is life-changing encounter with Jesus that leaves the person's world forever altered. *If it does not, one must wonder if one really sees at all, if there ever was a real encounter at all...*

## **The Setting: John's Gospel**

An American novelist writes:

The Gospel of John is the most mysterious book in the New Testament... (p. 38)  
Set against ancient world literature, he adds:

And if two thousand years of pious handling had not dimmed both John's story and its demand, his Gospel would still be seen as the burning outrage it continues to be, a work of madness or blinding light. Its homely but supremely daring verbal strategies, the human acts it portrays and the claim it advances—from the first paragraph—demand that we make a hard choice. If we give it the serious witness it wants, we must finally ask the question it thrusts so flagrantly toward us. Does it bring us a life-transforming truth, or is it one gifted lunatic's tale of another lunatic, wilder than he? (p. 39)

One might of course ask that of all the Gospels.

In fact, if the *Gospel* at times does not positively *sizzle* in our hands as "burning outrage", like the proverbial hot potato we can't let go of yet can't hang onto without burning, then we need to go back and read and reread the Gospels with a renewed sense of tip-toe expectant discovery. That goes for the entire Bible!... *The Bible in fact is the most renewable literary/spiritual/hot potato resource known to humanity!*

## **Five Movements**

There are five movements to the story of John 9, written like a Play in Five Acts:

1. the initial encounter with Jesus of the blind man;

2. the healing, and immediate questions by townspeople of the former blind man's identity;
3. the encounter with the Pharisees;
4. the encounter with the man's parents;
5. and the final reprised encounter with Jesus.

### **First Movement**

In the first movement, Jesus, with his disciples, encounters a man born blind from birth. The disciples with him, drawing on common belief, attribute the man's blindness to previous sin.

The attempt to explain the physical condition is lost on Jesus. No attempt at an explanation involving judgment of anyone will do. Evil exists. All explanations apart from what God has done in Christ do not suffice. Put differently: An agonizing question the Bible never answers *theoretically* or *theologically* is “**Why?**”... in response to evil. Yet this very question is devastatingly posed by Jesus on the cross:

*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*—My God, My God, **why**[...] have You forsaken Me?  
(Matthew 27:46).

This could be an utterly *atheistic* cry. The biblical answer to that heart-wrenching scream is not a mild, comforting piece of theology our pastors learn at seminary, but is found in the shattering and spectacular demonstration of Resurrection! Famed author of *Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien invented a word for this called *eucaastrophe*, meaning the “ultimate turn for the Good so that everyone can live happily ever after like in the best fairy-stories”. He calls the Resurrection the *eucaastrophe* of the Incarnation. In turn he claims, the Incarnation is the *eucaastrophe* of human history! Wow and wow again! He nails it.

So Jesus utterly sidesteps speculation about origins of evil in favour of just accepting the way things are with this man, as Jesus also did later at the Cross. But in both cases, “*the deeds of God will be put on display.*” Jesus proceeds to work a miracle in the blind man's life, and in turn God works the *eucaastrophe* miracle for the cosmos in the Resurrection. Jesus is, after all, the Light of the world!

Jesus changes the man's blindness to sight through a straightforward physical act of rubbing mud on the man's eyes. This was not an unheard of act in the ancient world. And it worked! *But there's more!...*

### **Second and Third Movements**

In the second and third movements of the story, the townspeople and Pharisees wade in. On the one hand, Jesus was closest to the Pharisees in theological belief. On the other, in the way in which they are encountered throughout the Gospels, the Pharisees appear forever at odds with Jesus, repeatedly hung up on the “**rules**”.

Not least in this story.

**So here is something to chew on:** read the Bible as a *Book of Rules*, and true spirituality is “ruled” out; and our own spirituality is dead in the water. The Bible is emphatically *not* a **Rule Book** rather a **Grace Book** where “*grace and truth*” (one of the grand themes of the Gospel of John) are the gem stone setting for the *jewel* called *Law*, which is the “*perfect Law of Freedom*”, as James puts it (1:25).

Jesus in our story had done the healing on the Sabbath. The rules were evident. No work – not even a healing! – is to be performed on the Sabbath. *Now just what is Jesus doing, breaking the “rules”?*

I think we all identify with the Pharisees if we look from a larger perspective. Not just in our faith, though perhaps too often there too. But in our understanding of how things ought to be in life. Just when we think we have life figured out about how things are and work, life’s “rules” as it were, too often something comes out of nowhere to throw us off. It just doesn’t fit with how the world should be, we know. And we can become terribly upset. Come to think of it, “rules” often do not work about many areas of life. Try to live by such expectations and we’ll often come up short.

This healing for instance. It just was not the way things should happen, not in God’s world. The Pharisees just knew. They’d read the Book of Rules, the Book of Moses, the Talmud – so they thought! So rather than adjust to new Light from as it turned out, the Source of all Light, the Light of the world, the Pharisees – and we too often – in response lock ourselves into our own darkness, into our own “rules” about how things ought to be: at home, at work, in society.

Following is a brief story about life’s “inexplicables” that just shouldn’t happen to anybody, especially to Christians, but all too often inexplicables do...

### **Wilma Derksen**

Wilma Derksen’s Christian Mennonite faith world was fairly safe and certain until November 30, 1984. Some may know her story. Wilma’s daughter set out to walk home from school Nov. 30, 1984 in Winnipeg, after her mother had told her on the phone she could not pick her up that day. Wilma tells this story in her book, *Have You Seen Candace?* Candace was not seen alive again by her family. She had been kidnapped, and left to freeze to death in an abandoned shack, after horrible mistreatment.

Suddenly, Wilma and her family were confronted with a whole different reality about the world. It was now out of control. Inexplicable. Alien. It broke all rules of normalcy.

This is the common lot of crime victims, of war victims, of all victims the world over, those to whom horrific events happen utterly beyond their control. This is the experience of those who cannot account for life the way it “should” be, the way the “rules” (we just know!) lay it down.

There are many further twists to Wilma's family's story. Thirty years later, it is far from over. It has not been easy. I have been one of the supporter friends (and colleagues) all these years. She and family most recently became a chapter in Malcolm Gladwell's *David and Goliath*. They have been overcomers despite it all, against all odds.

#### **Fourth Movement**

In the fourth movement, the parents are brought into the picture.

They are fearful of the authorities, and for good reason. Their entire social and cultural comfort zone could be destroyed if they are thrust out of the synagogue. Like being suddenly deported to an alien land and culture. So they deflect all questions back to their son, other than verifying that he is indeed their son.

One can only imagine the alienation of the son, since the parents seem far more taken with fear than the sudden joyful turn of events in their son's life. Are they not so like us in our fear, in our (too often) chosen blindness?

The authorities however tell the newly seeing man that the healing could have nothing to do with Jesus, who was an obvious sinner. With the authorities' inability and refusal to "see" Jesus, in the words of one commentator, we see that

Here is the most vivid explication in the whole Gospel of the statement that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness neither comprehends it nor overcomes it (Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, p. 123).

So the religious authorities try to terrorize everyone else into blindness. Isn't this so ironic: that religious leaders reject the very Light shining on them?! While the Light is not intended to bring judgment, rather healing and wholeness, by our very reaction to it, choosing to remain in the darkness or choosing the Light, we all nonetheless as they close-up with Jesus, pass judgment on ourselves. No one, including religious leaders, is exempt.

However, for the man healed of blindness, much of the theological/ethical stuff simply passed him by. And, perhaps because he all his life as a blind person had experienced life as an outsider/"deported one", he cuts to the chase about any fear of being yet further "deported", further rejected, and says simply to the authorities,

*If this man is a sinner, I don't know. I am not qualified to say. I only know one thing: I was blind, and now I see* (verse 25).

There is ever something profoundly simple about the choice of faith to embrace Light over darkness. Yet the implications are life-changing. Another immense irony: *the blind man gets it, and ends up doubly seeing! – both physically and spiritually!* But not the religious authorities.

In further interaction with the authorities, they at last elicit some theological reflection from the former blind man. This healed man knows now that Jesus is "*from God*" – one

of those profound theological insights the Gospel of John was written to induce according to chapter 20. The authorities throw him out of the synagogues upon his confession of that faith. The blind man has learned that Jesus is not only a man, but a *prophet*. He has begun his double journey of sight. He begins to follow the “*True Light who shines upon the heart of everyone*”, who had now entered the cosmos according to the Prologue of John’s Gospel. There is still more to come.

### **Fifth Movement**

In the fifth and final movement of the “play” that makes up chapter 9, Jesus goes to find the healed man. In that he is “Everyman/Everywoman”, we see in this a reminder that Jesus is ever looking for us. “*For the Son of Man came to seek and to liberate the lost* (Luke 19:10).” This is a pursuit that never ends throughout our lives. Jesus unrelentingly is “**THE HOUND OF HEAVEN**”, as the brilliant 19<sup>th</sup>-century poem by Francis Thompson puts it, with the same title.

The blind man now seeing is just waiting to know what to do in response to Jesus. Readiness to faith has been awakened. The willingness just needs a direction, faith, its object.

The blind/then seeing man began with understanding Jesus to be a *man*, then moved to a new insight that he was a *prophet*. Finally there is a response of worship of Jesus as “*Son of Man*”. *Judgment* has been at work. But notice it all revolves around *seeing and not seeing*, not around issues of *guilt and innocence*. Not surprisingly, the Pharisees discover that they have been judged already, just because they have failed to recognize the Light.

### **Debbie Morris**

In 1993 Sister Helen Prejean wrote *Dead Man Walking*, then a movie followed, about her work visiting men on Death Row in the State of Louisiana. One of those was Robert Willie, truly a sad case of humanity. He was executed Dec. 28, 1984.

One story Prejean did not tell in her book was of another of Robert Willie’s victims. Debbie (Cuevas) Morris and her boyfriend were kidnapped at gunpoint by Willie and his partner, recent escapees from Angola State Prison in Louisiana. About two nights before the kidnapping, the two convicts had also kidnapped, raped, and violently murdered Faith Hathaway. It was for that that Willie was eventually executed. Then they kidnapped 16-year-old Debbie Cuevas and her boyfriend. Both, remarkably, survived!

In 1998, Morris published a book which tells of the ordeal, entitled *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking*. In the concluding paragraphs of the book, she raises the question of justice. She writes:

I’ve seen mankind’s idea of ultimate justice; I have more faith in God’s. And even God seems to put a higher priority on forgiveness than on justice.

Then she makes this startling comment:

We don’t sing “Amazing Justice”; we sing “Amazing Grace

”. (pp. 250 & 251)

God’s *judgment*, says Morris, in a cosmic paradox, turns out to be his *mercy*, his *grace*, his *forgiveness*. Because Light has come into that very cosmos!

It takes us to the end of the book to discover that Morris’ understanding of *justice* is that it is in fact, *mercy*, *grace* and *forgiveness* – the very antithesis of *punitive* Law! That is *her* conclusion, the victim of a terrible ordeal of kidnapping and rape. She *sees* while other religious and not religious folk fail to see.

### **Conclusion**

Life in the end is all about *gift*, all about the *gift of Sight*, the *gift of Light*. It is a paradox of judgment. If we are judgmental, we fail to see the world shot through with grace. If we fail to take hold of God’s grace, we stand judged already. Such is the nature of Light, such is the nature of Jesus in the world.

Darkness and light, blindness and sight. They are the central themes of this story today. Let us choose, again, today to walk in the Light. Let us renew again, today, our commitment to follow Jesus.

Amen.

## **Closing Prayer**

Jesus, in John's Gospel, Chapter 8, you said:

*I am the light that shines through the cosmos; if you walk with Me, you will thrive in the nourishing light that gives life and will not know darkness.*

Please shine your light in us today. Please strengthen our walk with You, so that we "will thrive in the nourishing light that gives life and will not know darkness."

Amen.

## **Blessing from Luke 1:78 – 79:**

*May a new day dawn upon you.*

*May the Sunrise from the heavens break through in your darkness.*

*May those who huddle in night,*

*those who sit in the shadow of death,*

*Be able to rise and walk in the light.*

*May you be guided in the pathway of peace.*