***HAZARDS OF HEALING***

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Text: John 9:1-41

It should have been all good, hazard-free, the kind of story that makes everyone smile, the kind of miracle that everyone can celebrate, the kind of act that everyone agrees is a blessing. A man, blind from birth, has his sight restored by Jesus with no more than a handful of spittled mud and a cleansing splash from a pool. For the first time he can see with his own eyes the color purple and the twinkling of stars at night and the freckles on his sister’s nose. He can put faces to neighbors he has known his whole life long. He can watch a hawk soar in the sky, a boat skim across the water, and a tiny ant tote a mighty breadcrumb across the floor. There are new possibilities for his life – to work and play and live without being wholly dependent upon the benevolence of others. Everyone should have rejoiced! But not so! In the 41 verses recording this story there is not a note of rejoicing, not a single alleluia, no awed murmurs of thanks from the man who was healed, nor his parents, nor his neighbors, nor the disciples, nor the Pharisees, nor the crowd. None! A man blind from birth is healed and no one rejoices! How can that be? Perhaps it is because some healings are not hazard-free, and this was one of those healings.

The hazards are not readily apparent at the onset of this story – what could be hazardous about healing or being healed? Then again there is a reason we have Good Samaritan laws to protect those who stop to offer aid in an emergency; good deeds sometimes carry unanticipated risks. Such hidden hazards existed throughout Jesus’ ministry – dangers inherent in others misunderstanding who he was and misinterpreting what he did, risks in challenging the powers-that-be who feared One who could do what they could not do: work miracles and capture the hearts of a crowd, One who could not and would not be controlled.

There are a cast of characters in this healing described by John. Each faced hazards of their own or posed some hazard to others. You heard their individual voices in the individual voices of those who spoke for them in our reading this morning. Did any of them speak for you?

Consider the disciples. They have a minor role in this drama, but the question they pose reflects a view prevalent then and in some circles today. They ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The assumption is that blindness is some form of punishment for sin. Like the false prophets in our nation who disregard Job’s teaching and self-righteously proclaim that some disaster or terrorist attack is the judgment of God for sins which they alone have identified, the disciples assume that the man’s blindness is the result of someone’s sin, perhaps his own or perhaps the sin of the parents visited upon their child. Jesus rejects that warped theology and sees instead an opportunity to turn human tragedy into divine triumph. Blindness is not a sign of sin, but healing the blindness will be a sign of God’s power.

Are you ever inclined to pass judgment before you look for a solution? Do you ever look at the man who is down and out and speculate about what he might have done instead of what he might need? Have you regarded a pregnant teen with disdain for her poor choice instead of compassion for her pressing needs? Are you quicker to judge or to be a source of help and healing? How often do you stand in the sandals of the disciples, looking at the neighbor in need and asking, “Who sinned?”

Consider the neighbors. They were folks who knew this blind man, for they had seen him begging across the years and may even have been a source of help to him from time to time. Yet after he was healed, they had difficulty coming to terms with what they saw with their own eyes. He who had been blind now could see, yet some of these neighbors who had seen him day after day, did not recognize him. Others knew him and asked, “How were your eyes opened?” When he described what had happened, how a man called Jesus had healed him, the skeptical neighbors asked, “Where is he?” and when the healed man who had never seen Jesus’ face could not say, these same neighbors hauled him off to the Pharisees to get some answers.

At no point do they embrace him, rejoice with him, welcome him with open arms. They seem more interested in the details of the miracle and the identity of the miracle worker than the blessing it was for their neighbor. They want an explanation to satisfy their curiosity and to quell their fear of the unknown in this man, blind from birth, who suddenly can see. “*Rejoice with those who rejoice! Weep with those who weep! Live in harmony with one another*,” writes Paul to the church in Rome. The blind man’s neighbors might have benefitted from those words. They might have spent at least a few moments rejoicing with him before demanding an explanation.

One of my mom’s best friends longed for a child but Charlotte was having difficulty getting pregnant. One day Charlotte arrived at my grandmother’s house. “I have good news,” she proclaimed, “I’m pregnant!” “O, Charlotte,” said my grandmother, “That’s wonderful! How’d it happen?” Sometimes we are better served in rejoicing with those who rejoice instead of asking for all the details or voicing doubts about the result! There is a time and place for compassionate questions, but not at the expense of sharing the joy or the sorrow. Do you take time to rejoice with your friend who rejoices or to weep with your neighbor who weeps? Or like those neighbors are you more interested in the dirty details?

Consider the blind man’s parents. Surely no one knew him better than they did, yet there is no account of any celebration with him. When the prodigal son returns the father kills the fatted calf and throws a party. When this son returns and gazes upon his parents for the first time, they do nothing. The only emotion expressed in the story is fear. When asked by the Pharisees how it is that their son could see, they confirm only that he is their son, born blind, who now sees. They say no more. “Ask him,” they say, for writes John, “*they were afraid of the Jews for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue*.” Fear for their own status kept them from embracing this good news about their son, fear kept them from believing in the One who had healed him, fear made them skeptics of the story their son was telling, for they had not seen it with their own eyes.

Are you willing to believe what you have not seen? Are you willing to take risks for your faith, to risk your social status in order to be faithful to the Lord your God? Does fear define your faith and your faithfulness? These parents lived in fear of the consequences of the healing of their blind son. What do you fear that keeps you from being boldly faithful?

Consider the Pharisees. They lived in fear of losing control of their position and their salvation. They tried to follow the law with precision and expected everyone else to do likewise. Faith meant first and foremost following the rules, not the spirit of the law. In so doing they were blinded to the miracle and messiah in their midst. Instead of being awed at the healing and catching a glimpse of Jesus as messiah, they saw a violation of the law in healing on the Sabbath and debated how such a sinner could be from God. Jesus did not fit their legalistic reading of faith and faithfulness, so they dismissed him and rejected him, and rejected too the man Jesus healed. Jesus called the Pharisees blind. He called them sinners. And they were. But they could not see it in themselves.

Are you a Pharisee? Are your concerns with the rules of faith and the traditions of the church blinding you to the Spirit of God at work in our midst? Are you open to new things God may be doing, or are you clutching so tightly to the way things have been, to what is familiar and comfortable to you, that you refuse to recognize God’s hand at work in a new way – in you, in us, in the church? Are you a Pharisee?

Consider the blind man. He never asked to be healed, at least not that we know of. Perhaps healing seemed an impossible dream for him. Then again maybe his prayer every morning was, “Lord, let me see today.” If so, it was a silent prayer, unspoken or at least unrecorded by John. When Jesus came by, he did not cry out from the side of the road; he didn’t beg for mercy from the Son of God or ask to be led to Jesus’ side in hope of experiencing a miracle. There is no indication that he even knew who Jesus was, let alone imagined that Jesus might restore his sight. The blind man did not choose Jesus. Jesus chose him – chose him to receive a blessing, chose him for healing, chose him as an example of the power of God at work in Jesus. That choice is grace!

The blind man’s path to faith began with that gracious choice of Jesus, but then he chose to go and wash in the pool as Jesus told him. Did he go because he believed or because he figured it could do no harm? John doesn’t tell us, but it is clear that faith is a journey for this man. He does not express belief in Jesus upon being healed; he does not go in search of the messiah. He simply tells what happened to those who ask. He just states the bare facts. But in being forced to answer questions he reflects on his healing, and in so doing he grows in faith as Jesus becomes for him the healer, then the prophet, then the messiah to whom he says, “Lord, I believe.” That final statement of faith comes when Jesus finds him after he is rejected by the Pharisees. Throughout this story, it is Jesus who seeks out the man rather than the man who seeks out Jesus.

Is your story like that of the blind man? Are you one whom Jesus has sought out and healed and saved by grace? Or are you one who has been searching for him and calling to him and asking for a miracle? Is your story of faith one of those that is too good to believe for some people, too good to tell unless asked? We come to faith in different ways – some as those who are seeking God, others as those who are lost and found, but always we come to faith by the amazing grace of a God who works miracles in our midst. Is the blind man’s story in any way your story?

This story of healing is full of characters, and so are these pews. On any given day we may see ourselves in any one of them – in the disciples or the neighbors or the parents or the Pharisees or the blind man. But the one constant across all our days is Jesus, the messiah, the one who heals and saves and seeks us out and longs for us to say with the man who once was blind but now does see, “Lord, I believe!” Amen