***A BLIND MAN HEALED***

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March 19, 2023

Text: John 9:1-41

Across these last four weeks we have met several people who had an encounter with Jesus – some by their own choosing, some not. The woman caught in adultery was dragged to Jesus by the Pharisees; Nicodemus sought out Jesus in the dark of night; the Samaritan woman at the well was minding her own business when Jesus approached her; and today, we hear that the man born blind never even spoke to Jesus before Jesus had plastered mud on his eyes and sent him to the pool of Siloam to wash it off and be healed. There is no “right way” to encounter Jesus. The encounters are as varied as the people he met, as varied as we are with our own stories of faith that differ in time and place and circumstance. Beware anyone who tells you, “This is how you meet Jesus.” For sometimes you meet Jesus and sometimes Jesus meets you, and often you never see it coming – literally or figuratively! Across all those stories, and our stories as well, is this common theme – God’s grace abounds!

*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.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

John Newton, the man who penned the words of that much-loved hymn, a slave ship captain turned pastor (which might be an even greater conversion than that of attorney to pastor), experienced God’s grace in a way that opened his eyes to who he had been and who he might yet be. He recognized that in aiding and abetting the slave trade, he had turned his back on God. He had been blind to the evil he was doing and to God’s will for his life. In words he chose for his epitaph:

*JOHN NEWTON*

*CLERK*

*ONCE AN INFIDEL AND LIBERTINE*

*A SERVANT OF SLAVES IN AFRICA*

*WAS*

*BY THE RICH MERCY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR*

*JESUS CHRIST*

*PRESERVED, RESTORED, PARDONED,*

*AND APPOINTED TO PREACH THE FAITH*

*HE HAD LONG LABORED TO DESTROY*

John Newton could write of God’s amazing grace because he experienced it! I can’t help but wonder if, as he sat down to write the words of that great hymn, he recalled the story we just heard of Jesus’ healing of the man born blind and connected it with his own story: *I was blind but now I see*.

On its face, John’s account of the blind man’s healing appears to be another miracle story confirming the power of God at work in Jesus. If the story stopped there perhaps that is all it would ever be – a powerful sign of the power of God. But the story does not end there; in John’s eyes this event is less about a miracle than it is about the Pharisees’ response, which we hope will never be our response, and so the story continues with the grumbling of the Pharisees and confusion among the neighbors.

Actually the story begins with confusion – on the part of the disciples; they assume that blindness must be some kind of divine punishment. Like the false prophets in our nation who disregard the teaching of Job and self-righteously proclaim that disasters are the judgments 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, perhaps his parents. They are looking for someone to blame. But 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. So, he mixes the dust with his own spit, pats it on the blind eyes of the man, and tells him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. Miraculously, the man is healed; he sees for the first time, and in that moment you might expect everyone to sing *Amazing Grace* and fall down at Jesus’ feet. But not so!

Neighbors who have known the man to be blind from birth can’t quite figure out how he is suddenly able to see. Some are willing to believe their eyes, but others are convinced that their eyes are deceiving them and the man they see is only someone who resembles the boy they knew to be blind; they are blind to the miracle. For the Pharisees the issue is more complex. Jesus has violated the law by healing on the Sabbath and kneading the mud which he spread on the blind man’s eyes, yet miraculously the blind man now sees. For Pharisees for whom adherence to the law was essential to finding favor with God, this is a paradox. If Jesus is from God, then he would not violate the law. Since Jesus violated the law, he cannot be from God. If Jesus is not from God, then he cannot heal the blind man. Yet the blind man is healed. Therefore, he must be from God, but if he is from God how could he violate the Sabbath? It makes their heads hurt, for they cannot reconcile Jesus and this healing in violation of the law. It is akin to Peter Alliss’ description of golf: “*an enigma wrapped in a mystery impaled on a conundrum*.” The Pharisees get little help from the man who was blind; he can testify to no more than he experienced – someone named Jesus, a man he has never seen, put mud on his eyes and told him to wash in the pool; when he did, he could see. That is his story, and the best explanation he can offer is: maybe he is a prophet. The blind man’s parents offer no help for fear of saying the wrong thing and being put out of the synagogue. So, the Pharisees are left to resolve the paradox on their own!

In some sense this is where we are – standing with the Pharisees with all the pieces of the puzzle in our hands, trying to put them together in order to see the big picture which is the kingdom of God. We’ve heard about the miracles Jesus performed, and they are no less miraculous today than they were in his day. We’ve heard his teaching and while much of it makes sense, there are still portions which irk us – things like, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you and turn the other cheek and take up your cross and follow me.” We have heard testimony from the Gospel writers about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (more about that next week) and rising from the dead himself – and it defies our experience and logic and reason. The paradox is not just a challenge for the Pharisees. It is the paradox we all face, a paradox of faith which is most starkly put to us in that question asked by Jesus of his disciples, “*Who do you say that I am?*”

In John’s account of the healing of the blind man only one person resolves that paradox – the man who was healed – and even for him the paradox was not resolved immediately. It was a journey of faith that began with blindness and healing, then moved to testifying that he was healed, then to speculating that Jesus might be a prophet, then to identifying himself as a disciple in front of the Pharisees, and finally to affirming in the presence of Jesus, “*Lord, I believe*.” His journey of faith included a miracle, challenges from those who doubted, threats from those who refused to believe, and revelation from the Son of God. It was a journey of faith that began with blindness and ended with seeing the world around him and seeing Jesus for who he really was and is. *I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

John wants us to take that journey, the journey from unbelief to belief, the journey from doubt to faith, the journey from blindness to seeing. It is a journey that the Pharisees refused to take, for they denied they were blind, so convinced were they that in their rigid interpretation of the law they saw clearly the things of God’s kingdom. Yet they did not recognize the Son of God in their midst!

The journey John wants us to take, the journey Christ bids us take, is a journey that begins by acknowledging that we are blind, that we are not able to figure out this paradox with logic or reason alone, that our salvation is a mystery of faith that is explained for us only with these words, “*Lord, I believe*.” The journey does not end with that confession, it begins anew. It is not an easy journey, for as you may recall, the man who was healed was reviled and rejected along the way. To be a disciple and make that confession of faith, *Lord, I believe*, does not assure smooth sailing from that point forward. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, “*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) For many of us the journey of faith has had little of those kinds of death threats along the way, but Christ issues a death threat of his own, calling us to die to the old way of life – to the blind way of seeing that has nothing to do with sight – and to embrace his new way of life which is full of amazing grace.

It is the life Jesus offered the woman caught in adultery, saying, “*Go and sin no more*.” It is the life Jesus described for Nicodemus as being “*born anew*.” It is the life that drinks deeply of that living water Jesus offered the woman at the well. It is the life the man born blind found, not when his eyes were opened, but when he confessed, “I believe.” It is a life of grace, and as Kathleen Norris suggests:

*Maybe that’s one reason we worship – to respond to grace. We praise God not to celebrate our own faith but to give thanks for the faith God has in us. To let ourselves look at God, and let God look back at us. And to laugh, and sing, and be delighted because God has called us God’s own*. [[3]](#endnote-3)

We are God’s own! That is grace – amazing grace! How sweet the sound! Amen

1. John Newton, *Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound*, 1779 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kathleen Norris, “Grace” in *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Riverhead Books:1998, p.151 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)