

HERE'S MUD IN YOUR EYE!¹
John 9: 1-41
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Learning to see, as we all know, is a lifelong task. It has very little to do with the results of an eye exam, or how thick our glasses might be, or whether we are considered blind. Some blind people see far better than some sighted people, and that seems to be the point of the story from the Gospel of John. It is about a blind man who saw a whole new world! How he came to see is enough to make generations of ophthalmologists turn over in their graves, but the point is not the mud, but the sight. This is a story about learning to see, and it is transacted on two levels.

I

The first, of course, is the physical level. A blind beggar meets Jesus, who touches his eyes and heals him. Then the legalists of the day get all hot and bothered because he healed the man on the Sabbath, which was against religious law. So they approach the man himself to get him to point the accusing finger at Jesus, but he will not give them what they want.

So they go after the beggar's parents, who really don't want to get involved and insist that the lawyers go back and interrogate their son. So the authorities

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try again to make him confess that this healer has to be a felon because he broke the law of the Sabbath. Then comes the great word, the final clincher that must have been the reason the whole story was included in the gospel of John. The formerly blind man lifts his sighted eyes to the powers-that-be and says with a twinkle in his understanding eyes: *One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.*²

That, of course, is the physical level of the story, but like most stories in the gospel of John, it functions on another level as well. I think that the early church was using this story to try to say that there is also a spiritual blindness, and that Christ can cure it. We must never forget that the early church was not guided by the New Testament; they wrote the New Testament! Their experience guided the writing; the writing did not guide their experience! The New Testament is their witness of what life is like following Christ. To them, following the way of Christ was as if a great blindness had been cured. The testimony of this beggar was really their testimony to the world: *One thing I know; that though I was blind, now I see!*

This story confirms what has a long and honorable history in our particular religious tradition. It is the value of testimony. And who can refute testimony? You can pile up graduate degrees; you can quote all the right

² John 9: 25.

authorities; you can hold up a wet finger in the wind; you can follow the trends and quote statistics; but you still have to sit up and take notice when someone says, “This is what I have experienced, and this I know.”

II

One obvious thing this story emphasizes is that faith can be a muddy, earthy affair. Just look at what Jesus did to this man! He made mud with his spit and spread it on the man’s eyes! You can’t get much more earthy than that! And although the early church surely had people in it who thought of this as some kind of magic saliva, the truth is that the healing power of clay made with spit was a common element of healing stories in the Greco-Roman world.

Do you remember that Subaru commercial in which the bride is late to her wedding because of a flat tire, and when she gets out of her car, the Subaru carrying her groom comes flying by and covers her with mud, and the punch line of the commercial is the best man commenting on the mud-spattered bride’s appearance, “Ah, the rugged out-doorsey type; nice choice!” Well, great weddings may be clean, but great marriages have to deal with the mud. Great marriages are made when love remains true and even deepens when life gets muddy.

So one of the things this story says about Christian faith is that it is sometimes muddy and messy. If our faith never gets down and dirty; if our faith

is perpetually clean and tidy and unwrinkled; if our faith never asks questions and never doubts and never needs to go to the cleaners; then we have to ask: “Are we as blind as that beggar?”

III

So what else lies embedded in this story? I think that a clear message here is the truth that faith does not always come instantly, like magic. It is a picture of a person whose healing was followed by a long process of discernment. When you read the entire story you can trace his gradually increasing level of understanding. When he is healed, he is interrogated about who healed him. First, he says, *The man called Jesus made mud....* That’s all he could muster. It’s not a very theological answer, is it? Then later he is interrogated again, and this time he says of Jesus, *He is a prophet.* Well, you see how his sight is getting better! Then later he is interrogated again, and he says, *One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.* Now there’s a practical man, for sure! He wasn’t too interested in the theological particulars; he just gave his testimony!

But in the end, Jesus comes back to pay him a visit, and the man says the most theological thing he could say, *Lord, I believe.* That is quite a long journey of being sighted! But wherever you are on what we might call “the insight spectrum,” you can be sure that you are an important part of this congregation.

IV

Why would I say such a thing? Well, it is obvious that we are a diverse group of people. There are people here in this congregation who represent every point on the spectrum this story presents. There are some here who frankly do not know what to make of this man Jesus. You are curious about him; you may even be fascinated by him; but you are far more comfortable talking about God without reference to Jesus, and you put up with all the Jesus talk.

There are others here who are perfectly willing to give special place to Christ. *He is a prophet*, said the man in the story, and that in itself is worth a great deal. That may be as far as some are able to go at this point. But nevertheless you stick with us and remain fascinated by the man from Nazareth. That is part of the Lenten journey.

Then there are those practical folk who don't worry too much about theology. You reflect the man's statement: *One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see*. You might say, "One thing I do know, here I feel community...here I can worship...here I can experience beauty and holiness...here I can sense the presence of God...here I can participate in a world-wide witness for what is good and right. That, too, is a worthy place to be.

Then, of course, there are those who, like the man at the end of the story, are quick to affirm the final statement: *Lord, I believe*. You are not bothered by

nagging doubts or persistent questions about Christ. You are ready to stand by him through thick and thin, and you will bear his name to the grave, gladly singing “What a friend we have in Jesus!”

But not everyone is there. We are all somewhere on that “insight spectrum,” and we will be until the day we die.

V

We live in the faith that someday, in the words of the apostle Paul, we *...will know fully even as I have been fully known.*³ Or, in the words of the old gospel song, “We’ll understand it better by and by.” But our “by and by” has not yet come, and we are called to live together with all our questions and our doubts, our joys and sorrows, our victories and defeats.

Yet we live in a quiet peace, not because we have figured it all out, but because we have experienced a kind of healing in the community of worship. There is a powerful presence here that taps you on the shoulder and says, “Here’s mud in your eye; go and wash, and then..see! See like you’ve never seen before!”

³ I Corinthians 13: 12.