

SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS LUTHERAN CHURCH

Sermon March 22, 2020

John 9:1-41

Why do we call the main character in this story “the man born blind” or “the man who had been blind”?

The obvious reason, I suppose, is that this is the way the Gospel of John refers to him. At least some of the time. In the first verse of John’s ninth chapter, he is described as a “man blind from birth.” Okay, that’s pretty accurate.

Once Jesus heals him, he is referred to directly several more times. In v. 8, he is “the man who used to beg.” In v. 13, it’s “the man who formerly had been blind.” And in v. 17, it is simply “the blind man,” as if those questioning him refuse to accept the transformation that has occurred for him. All of these designations help us to understand him in terms of what he used to be, especially in terms of his limitations. Maybe the intention is to recognize what he has overcome. But I wonder if that bog us down in the past and risk defining him in terms of previous limitations.

I wonder how often we do that in our lives as well – define ourselves in terms of limiting factors or difficult things we’ve experienced. Even if we’ve overcome them, and taken pride in that, I still wonder if it links us too strongly to the past.

When we refer to some as “divorced” or “widowed,” for instance, are we honoring a significant relationship that has ended or defining someone in terms of what they once were?

In this story, it seems like it’s just really, really hard for the people around the man who received his sight – which John calls him in v. 18 – to adjust to his new reality or see him for anything more than what he used to be. And so some folks don’t recognize him at all. Others,

including his parents, know what he struggled with and see his transformation but aren't sure what to make of it.

The two exceptions to this pattern of being trapped in designations reflecting the past are, first, the man himself and, second, Jesus. The man who sees can only rejoice in his recovery and looks ahead to an open and even delightful future that probably exceeds anything he had previously imagined. How else could he engage the religious authorities who have intimidated others (including his parents) by poking fun at them: "Do you, also, want to become his disciples?" There's a certain joyfulness to his dialogue that is easy to miss if we understand him only as "the man born blind." Consider the brave playfulness of his answers to the authorities: "I do not know if he was a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (v. 25) Or, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (30-33). He has been given an open future and nothing will deter him from taking it.

Jesus also looks to the future rather than the past, inviting this man to faith and encouraging him by not just taking his question seriously but by revealing himself to him. All of this leads the man who now sees to make the quintessential confession in John's Gospel: "Lord, I believe."

Maybe it is time for each of us to take stock of our past – the good, the difficult, the encouraging, the challenging – and ask what we need to let go of in order to receive the open future God has prepared for us. What titles or names are holding us back? How do we understand ourselves in terms of tragedy or challenge or limitation? And how can we grab hold of the open future that Jesus' grace and forgiveness and resurrection provide for us? How can the baptismal identity of "child of God" replace some of the other names we've been called or have accepted?

This is not at all to deny the importance of the past or some of the scars (or for that matter triumphs) we carry forward. But it is, maybe, a way to remind us that the way forward is in the future. I am sure you have all heard the observation of why the windshield of a car is so big and the rearview mirror relatively small: because while it's good to be able to glance back once in a while, the key to getting where you need to go is looking forward.

I think the main point of this story is the good news that Jesus is calling us forward. The past matters, but it is past. The health crisis we are all caught up in right now also matters to us. But we will get through it and move forward. Jesus' cross reminds us that the hurts, sorrows, mistakes, and regrets that have marked us may describe us, but they do not define us, and neither will the Corona virus, for we are God's beloved children. And Jesus' resurrection assures us that God's love is more powerful than our tragedies and crises and that with Him, the future is always open.

Amen.

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