

Exposing Darkness
John 9:1-41; Ephesians 5:8-14
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There is something really interesting about this long gospel passage. One commentator I read said that we usually think of this primarily as a healing story. A story wherein Jesus, combining spit and dirt, heals a blind man. But, he pointed out, the healing occurs at the beginning of this really long passage that is actually about the aftermath, about how the community responds to the once blind man.

At first people who know him do not recognize him. They debate whether it is actually him. "I am the man," he says. Probably more than once.

Then they grill him with questions. Question after question. They bring him before the religious scholars. Twice. Even his own family is frightened by the situation. They refuse to get involved in the situation.

Eventually the community drives him out of town. Talk about a lopsided change in fortune! They could not tolerate him existing outside the box of their expectations.

The once-blind-man can't answer their questions, and they are not satisfied. On Wednesday night during our Lenten study class, I had read a portion of this passage, and we reflected upon it. Bernie Monbouquette observed that the healed man would not know what Jesus looked like. The crowd was wanting to know where Jesus was, but the blind man wouldn't know because he hadn't seen Jesus. Jesus had sent him away to wash his eyes, and sight came away from Jesus. When the blind man says, "I do not know," he really doesn't know, because he doesn't even know what Jesus looks like.

Then, notice how Jesus stays in the background throughout most of this story. He only reappears at the end when the community has driven the healed man out. Jesus has compassion and shows up. Looking for the man, Jesus finds him.

The healed man does not have the knowledge to answer the community's questions, but he repeatedly states the simple facts. He once was blind, but now he sees. He doesn't know how, or why, or even who, really. But he has had this amazing experience and all he can do is say, "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

In the book we are reading for our Wednesday night study, the author, Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, suggests that when reading a story we ask ourselves three questions: "What does this work invite you to do? What does it require of you? What does it not let you do?"

Now, those are pretty intriguing questions to use in approaching biblical stories. Asking these questions of this story, what answers might we get?

For one thing, this story doesn't let us easily ignore the experience and testimony of the healed man. Most of us, I suppose, would find ourselves as one of the members of the crowd,

asking all the questions, wanting an explanation. But the story, in the integrity and dignity it gives to the healed man, doesn't let us get away with that. If we join the crowd, then we come across as lacking grace, compassion, and a straightforward honesty about the situation.

What does the story require of us? It requires us to admit that we don't know. That we don't have all the explanations and answers. And beyond that, by accepting our limitations, we cultivate some important virtues. Humility, for instance, and empathy.

Which brings me to what this story invites us to do. It invites us to open ourselves to the perspectives of other people in the hope that doing so will lead us to the good, the right, and the true.

Which is where we connect this story from the Gospel of John to the passage from Ephesians which Kerrie read earlier. This passage is a "triumphal declaration" of God's activity on our behalf, of what the grace of God does for us. The passage draws from an early Christian baptismal hymn:

Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.

God has promised to expose darkness and change us from darkness to light. We will then bear fruit that is good and right and true.

The author then invites us to also participate in finding "out what is pleasing to the Lord." We are invited to join in the effort to expose darkness and seek truth and goodness and righteousness.

But how do we do that? Because the Christian church does not have an excellent track record on this point. More often than not, we come across sounding and acting like the community in the story from John – unable to accept the testimony of one who has had an experience outside-the-box.

Reading these two biblical texts alongside one another, we are reminded that the search for truth is not about dogmatic certainty. Because these passages remind us that we see from our own limited experiences. The way to truth and goodness and righteousness is a community that can engage different perspectives in dialogue with one another.

In his commentary on this passage, Ward B. Ewing, the Dean and President of the General Theological Seminary in New York, writes:

The way to insight and truth is through sustainable dialogue and sharing within the community of faith. Openness and transparency, the ability to discuss without demanding conformity, the strength to be influenced as well as to influence – such characteristics allow truth to emerge. The multiplicity of perspectives, honestly shared, instructs the individual perspectives, giving a clearer vision of the issue or concern.

And this is our spiritual and communal practice of care for this Sunday. Our darkness is transformed into light in the process of sharing our differing perspectives and stories with one another. We must show respect for those who disagree with us. We must cultivate

opportunities for civil discourse. We must genuinely be open to learning from one another.

And I think this spirit of openness is something that First Central has worked diligently to maintain over the years. It is a core part of our identity and something we care deeply about. Attend one of our small groups or one of our classes and you are very likely to hear, "I disagree with you about that." The great thing is, you will hear it expressed with both sincerity and grace. Rarely have I encountered defensive, emotional responses to disagreement in this congregation.

Recently someone who has been visiting asked me, "The church says that everyone is welcome, no matter what. But I'm sure that there are some things that you have to agree to, so what are those?"

I gave him two answers. First, that quite honestly we really don't expect anyone wanting to join to agree to anything. Any agreements we come to are worked out in conversation and community. But, then, I paused, and said, "Actually, there is one thing." And that one thing is being willing to live with people who do hold different opinions and are willing to disagree.

This attitude, which inhabits the same room as empathy and humility, is also a partner with God's holy work in our lives. Ward Ewing states,

As we surrender our lives and wills to God, there is a loss of egoism, a destruction of the core of self-concern.

Our darkness is exposed and we are turned into light. Our hearts are opened. And, like the once-blind man, we too can proclaim: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."