

SLD04.03.11 Fourth Lent
John 9:1-41
Emory Presbyterian Church
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“KOKO?”

Today’s lectionary bring us to yet another loong passage in the gospel of John, replete, as was last week’s, with plenty of drama, conversations and the inevitable missed cues among the clueless. Only *this* week more players are involved. If last week was intimate small theatre between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, this week a whole opera company of Palestinians is on stage. If last week we were bounced like a tennis ball between the “He Said/She Said” of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, this week we’re more like a Quidditch ball zinging among Jesus, his disciples, a blind man, his parents, some Pharisees, and a well-populated Greek, or in this case, Roman, chorus of Jewish neighbors, onlookers and occasional passersby. Finally, if last week primary question was “Who is Jesus?,” this week’s is “Who *gets* Jesus?”

Listen now to John 9:1-41:

9As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We^{*} must work the works of him who sent me^{*} while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept

saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight." ¹² They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know.'

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet.'

18 The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" ²⁰ His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." ²² His parents said this because 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. ²³ Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him.'

24 So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." ²⁵ He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶ They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷ He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" ²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." ³⁰ The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³² Never

since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? ³⁷Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷ Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, ³⁹I believe.” And he worshipped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.

The scene opens with Jesus and his disciples walking through the streets of Jerusalem. Jesus has just been in the temple arguing with Jews who did not believe he was the Messiah. Which raises an important point to keep in mind about today's story as well as about John's gospel in general, which is the perennial division between the Jews who recognize Jesus as the Messiah and the Jews who do not.

Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus is forever arguing with “the Jews,” saying things like “you do not know where I come from or where I am going,” (8:14b) or “you are from below and I am from above” (8:23), or “you are from your father the devil, and choose to do your father's desires.” (8:44) – things that incline his more sensitive of his Jewish listeners to pick up stones and throw them at him. I mean, who likes to be told such things?

But what we need to remember is that Jesus and his disciples and followers are also Jews. So the Jews Jesus and company keep disparaging are actually not some separate sect but their own brothers and sisters in faith. Despite the anti-Semitic uses to

which the gospel of John has been put over the millennia, the tension simmering here is not between Gentile Christians and traditional Jews, but between Jews who follow Jesus and Jews who don't, that is, between Christian Jews and traditional Jews. However contentious it may appear, it is an internecine battle - a "family fight," if you will – between Jews who believe Jesus is the Messiah and Jews who do not.

Equally important to note is that at the time of the writing of John's gospel, the Jews who do *not* believe that Jesus is the Messiah are the ones who control the synagogue. And for these them, there is more is at stake than theological differences.

The gospel of John emerged over time from the Johannine community reaching its final form some time around 90-100 years after the death of Christ.¹ By this time the Jews had revolted against in Romans, the temple had been destroyed (again) and Judaism itself was undergoing a kind of internal reassessment. Anxiety was high around the relationship between the Jews and the Romans and in order to present a united front, so to speak, measures were taken to eliminate what were regarded as harmful sectarian divisions" – harmful sectarian divisions such as that pesky Jesus and his followers. The best way to deal with such divisive groups, felt the Jewish authorities, was to sanction or even expel from the community. And indeed, fear of expulsion from the synagogue percolates throughout John's gospel, but never more so than in today's story.²

So here's Jewish Jesus and his Jewish disciples walking through the streets of predominately Jewish Jerusalem, after having just aroused the anger of the thorough going traditional Jews of the thoroughly Jewish synagogue, when they pass by a Jewish

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_John#Authorship

² "John," D. Moody Smith, Harper's Bible Commentary, James L. Mays, ed., Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1988, p.1045.

blind man, prompting Jesus' Jewish disciples to pose a particularly Jewish question:

"Rabbi," they ask (their Jewish teacher), "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

For, as they all know, it is written in Exodus that "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generations of those who reject me." (20:5b) Jeremiah, too, writes of a time when "the parents ate sour grapes and the children's teeth were set on edge."

So the disciples want to know is whose sin caused this particular man's blindness – his own or his parents'? It's a reasonable question...from a traditional Jew. From a Christian Jew...well, for Jesus who's been sparring all morning with traditional Jews, maybe not so much.

"Neither the man nor his parents sinned," replies Jesus. This man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Does Jesus mean God intentionally made the man blind for teaching purposes? That the man's lifelong blindness is merely an object lesson for sincere seekers? I can't imagine, but Jesus doesn't offer further explanation.

Instead he calls himself the "light of the world," spits in the dirt, and slaps the resulting mud on the man's eyes, and then tells him to wash it off in a nearby pool. Apparently Jesus does not invent this inarguably gross remedy for blindness; it is evidently standard practice in first century Palestine. However, it was not known often to work, as is evident from the astonishment of the man's community.

"Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" they ask.

"I'm the man," he says, as he explains to the growing crowd about the efficacy of Jesus' spit soup. Unable to believe it, the crowd take the formerly blind man to the

Pharisees for their opinion. But the Pharisees do not address the miracle, caring only about its timing. “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy Sabbath of solemn rest to the Lord; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death,” says Exodus 35:2

Jesus, it appears, has broken Sabbath law.

“This man is not from God,” declare the Pharisees, “for he does not observe the Sabbath.”

Others mutter, “yeah but, how can a sinner perform such signs?”

Then the Jews (that is, the traditional Jews) bring in the man’s parents to investigate further. “Is this your son, who you say was born blind?” they ask.

“Yeah, that’s our boy all right, and he was born blind, sure enough.

“How then does he see?”

“We don’t know how he got his sight back, or who helped him,” his parents waffle. And maybe they really don’t, but chances are.... Then, as scripture tells us, out of fear, the man’s parents advise the Pharisees – “You better go ask him – he’s of age.” This is called “passing the spiritual buck.”

So the Pharisees turn their attention back to the formerly blind man.

“Give glory to God,” they demand. “We know that Jesus is a sinner!”

“Look,” says the formerly blind guy. “I don’t know whether or not this guy is a sinner. All I know is that before I was blind and now I can see, okay? So back off. “ (Remember, the man did not ask to be healed, never mind to be the center of all this debate.)

“Yeah, but how did he do it?” the Pharisees press.

“What,” says the former blind guy, “now *you* want to be his disciples, you’re asking me all these questions?”

And, says scripture, “they reviled him.”

“Grrrrr. *We’re* not his disciple; *we* follow Moses!”

Whereupon the man launches into a splendid piece of logical reasoning:

God doesn’t listen to sinners. God listened to Jesus. Therefore Jesus must not be a sinner.

Nobody can do anything apart from God. Jesus did something amazing. Jesus must be from God.

Which drives the Pharisees nuts, so they drive the man out of the synagogue.

What the man’s parents are afraid might happen to them, happens to their son. He gets *aposuna go gei* – thrown out – excommunicated – jettisoned from the only familial, social, religious community he knows. In the course of a single day, the guy gains his sight, but basically loses his world. Wonder if he thanked Jesus.

In any case, the story goes on with Jesus interviewing the healee and refuting the Pharisees – all the Lenten texts this year are really looong, and there are so many potential directions to go with them. But what I’d like to focus on this morning are the stakes associated with following Jesus. This story practically reeks with the anxiety and fear of a ruling religious class trying to hang on to its authority; a community trying to hold itself together; of people trying to remain as “neutral” and generically inclusive as possible in order to maintain their social and religious community; of disciples trying to sort through which parts of the old stuff still apply and which parts have to be tossed. And for his part, Jesus seems frustrated with the whole lot!

What becomes increasingly apparent to me is what a messy thing it is to hang around Jesus. The guy seems forever to be causing problems, creating divisions, forcing choices.

At first it's okay for Jewish Christians to love Moses as much as they love Jesus. But then comes the destruction of the Temple, and the heightened anxiety of the Pharisees, and the increasingly radical spin on Jesus' teachings, and, well, it looks like the disciples have to make up their mind. Pick up on one and leave the other behind. It's not often easy and not often kind.³

Remember the Transfiguration? When Moses and Elijah disappear and only Jesus remains? In the Johannine community, it looks like Jesus' disciples have finally to decide whom to follow, to pick Jesus up and leave Moses and Elijah behind.

Seems like Christian discipleship is often like that, causing problems, forcing choices, creating divisions. Disciples of Jesus Christ are forever having to choose.

Did you ever have to make up *your* mind? Say "yes" to one and let the other one ride? According to the Lovin' Spoonful, there's often so many changes and tears you must hide. Because the thing is, you choose, you lose. Of course, you gain, too, but choosing one way and not the other means gaining something but giving up something else. And what the Jews who choose Jesus in John's time have to give up is the tradition that formed them, the faith they love, the place they worship, the people they look up to, the community they cherish. Back in John's time, you choose Jesus and you're likely to get *aposuna go gei* – thrown out – excommunicated – jettisoned

³Lyrics from Lovin' Spoonful's "Did you Ever Have To Make Up Your Mind."
<http://www.guntheranderson.com/v/data/didyoev.htm>

from what is familiar to you. Jesus opens your eyes and look out! You're liable to lose the world as you know it.

How about you and me? What are the stakes of discipleship for us? What do we gain and lose when we decide to follow Jesus? When we profess our faith, what do we gain besides membership in a church? When we commit and become active in a given faith community, what do we lose besides some of our free time?

Or do we even choose discipleship?

Back when I was working at Coca-Cola in the 80's, we used to use the expression KOKO quite a bit. "KO" is the stock symbol for Coca-Cola and KOKO meant "keep on keeping on," which, in the 80's, meant perpetual industry growth. Today it'd mean perpetual flat or no growth. So, really, KOKO just mean keep on keeping on with whatever is happening right now.

For many of us North American mainline Protestants, faith is often a KOKO kind of affair. Whatever faith tradition we were born into, or got into the habit of, or was most convenient to our home when our kids were small, that's the faith tradition we keep on keeping on with. Or, if we fell away in college or when we got married, or when we got busy, then we most often keep on in that direction.

For most of us, the stakes don't really seem that high one way or another. Certainly few of us fear anything as dramatic as getting *aposuna go gei* – thrown out – excommunicated – jettisoned from what is familiar to us.

Does it cost anything anymore to follow Jesus?

Lent is a good time to ask ourselves such a question. Just as Jesus goes off for 40 wilderness days to ask himself what it means to be the Son of God, we're meant during Lent to ask ourselves what it means to follow the Son of God. What it costs, if

anything. What we gain or lose. What direction we choose. Or are we pretty much just going to “KOKO.” Keep on keeping on. Same ole, same ole.

Remarks Frederick Buechner, “to hear yourself answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are becoming as a disciple, but who you are failing to become. And all in all, it can be a pretty depressing business. But if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it,” says Buechner, “something like Easter may be at the end.”

That’s our hope, anyway, here in the middle of Lent, that something like Easter may be at the end. But it being such a messy thing to follow Jesus, maybe it’d be a good idea no to count on that so much. Since, when Jesus opens our eyes, we may lose the world as we know it, maybe it’d be safer if we didn’t finally...you know...decide.

To the glory of God. Amen.