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John 9:1-41

For the last 25 years of my life, I have worn the label Catholic. I married into an Italian Catholic family. I have a master's in theology from Ohio Dominican. And I was on staff at the Newman Center for the last three years of Paulist presence there leading adult initiation and adult faith formation programs.

But before that, my label was Southern Baptist. I grew up in Texas in a family of very devoted Southern Baptists. My grandfather was a Southern Baptist preacher and pastor. My grandmother and dad were Sunday school teachers. My mother was a church secretary. I started teaching Sunday school and Bible studies as a teenager in high school. I grew up in the church - it was home to me.

When it came time to go to college, I only ever wanted to go one place and that was Baylor University. My intention at the start was to go into some sort of ministry - education or music maybe. When I got there, I took as many scripture classes as I could; I loved studying the Bible. I ended up with a degree in software engineering and that's a story for another day!

My first job out of college, I went to work for NASA. And I did that several years and I enjoyed it. It was an interesting line of work. But I think the call of ministry has been with me my whole life, and it continued to pull me.

So when I was 25 years old, I applied to serve with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board. And I received a one year assignment to do administrative work at one of their Mission Hospitals in the Middle East. I went from working for NASA to living in a little village in the mountains in the country of Yemen.

Nowadays, when I tell people I lived in Yemen, most people have a sense of sort of where that is or at least what part of the world that's in. Sadly it's made the news a lot in recent years. But when I got assigned there in the early 90s. I actually had to go to the library and do some digging to find a book that had a map that told me where Yemen was. You can probably imagine some of the experiences I had

working at a Third World Mission Hospital. My liaison at the time told me Yemen was a place “hurtling headlong into the middle ages” and I think that captured it pretty well!

When I came back from that experience, I went around to different churches to tell my story. And I decided I had one point that I wanted to leave people with, one point that I wanted to make and that was this: that we all have far more points of connection than not. We all have more in common than not. We're all more alike than we are different.

So I told stories about the family that kind of took me under their wing. We could barely communicate because I never did really learn Arabic and they didn't know any English. But the mother was every inch a mother. She would come bring me food when I was sick, which, living in a third world country, was a lot. She fussed over me if I was going out with friends. She worried about my reputation as a single woman in a Muslim country. She had hopes and dreams for her own children, that they would have a good and happy life. She was very much a mother that I could relate to.

Her oldest daughter was 16 at the time. Nadia was like any idealistic 16 year old you've ever met. She knew exactly what was wrong with the world and how to fix it. And she was going to do exactly that despite all the family and cultural opposition that she was up against.

Then there was the little girl I befriended. She was a burn patient in the hospital. She had basically lived in the hospital for over a year getting treatment for her burns. She was only 12 but in that culture she was considered a woman old enough to be married. But when I would go visit her every day, all she wanted was for me to read her children's stories. And her delight in those stories was just like the delight you've experienced if you've ever read a book to a child. She wanted to be accepted and loved beyond the disfigurement of her burns. She wanted friends to laugh with. She was a child like any other child.

We all have much more in common than not. We all have more connections than we realize.

I would apply that to us here today. I'm a Catholic speaking to Baptists. We pray in

different ways. But we all pray to the same God who loves us. We have different styles of what we like to do on Sunday mornings. But we all have the same aim of worshiping the God who loves us and longs for us to see her in each other. We have different theologies about things. We talk about things in different ways. And yet, if we were to begin to make a list of all of the points of connection and agreement that we have, I'd venture to guess that we'd probably find that that list would keep us far too busy to worry overly much about the differences. We're all made in the image and likeness of a God who loves us and longs to be in relationship with us.

So we're here in this season of Lent and today in the Catholic church we celebrate Laetare Sunday. Laetare being the Latin word for Rejoice. It comes from Isaiah 66:10 "Rejoice O Jerusalem." Rejoicing feels a little strange to those of us observing the season of Lent - which in most Catholic churches is a rather somber experience. But I love this reminder that the season of Lent is preparing us for the joy of Easter, the joy of a risen Christ. And that joy is what we need to be reminded of sometimes, especially as we hit the halfway point of Lent on our journey to Easter.

Today's gospel reading from John is a long one. A large portion of it focuses on the reaction of the Jewish religious leaders to what Jesus did when he cured the blind man. They come back again and again to *how* such a miracle occurred. *How* was a man who was born blind... *how* could he suddenly see? *How* did this happen?

This is a little challenging for us to fully appreciate in our culture. The idea that someone born blind could have their eyesight restored to some degree is not beyond the realm of possibility for us. In fact, we might assume that it's a very doable thing. But in the ancient world if someone was born blind, they were blind for life. They couldn't suddenly see. It just didn't happen. So the fact that this man was born blind and then could see makes the Jewish religious leaders focus on *how* - *how* did this happen?

Now the evidence seems pretty plain: that a man was born blind and Jesus healed him and now he can see. It's feels almost like the Pharisees practice a willful blindness. They blatantly ignore the fact that a miracle has taken place and instead they choose to focus on the fact that Jesus did it on a Sabbath which violated the Law.

To be honest, I'm quick to judge the Pharisee's blindness - it all feels so obvious to me from a distance. And yet...! I have to ask myself... How often do I refuse to examine my assumptions about people and situations? How often do I prefer to remain in a comfortable trench of blind judgment? How often do I ignore my connections and commonalities with others? How many miracles do I miss?

I want to focus on the beginning of the passage - the interaction between Jesus and the man and also the ending interaction between them.

Verse 5 picks up with Jesus saying:

While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

When he had said this, he spat on the ground

and made clay with the saliva,

and smeared the clay on his eyes,

and said to him,

"Go wash in the Pool of Siloam" —which means Sent—.

So he went and washed, and came back able to see.

I want to think about some of the little details here. Right away I notice that this man doesn't ask to be healed which is interesting. There are lots of stories in the gospels where people ask Jesus for healing but this is not one of them. Jesus sees the man and decides to heal him. It's Jesus who takes the initiative.

I know something that's been true of my own spiritual journey is that I constantly think I am looking for God. I'm searching for God. I have to find God. And every single time God brings me to the realization that it's really God who has been pursuing me. It's God who wants to be in relationship, in connection with me. God always takes the initiative.

But another detail from these verses is when Jesus says "Go wash in the pool of Siloam." Archeology tells us this pool was probably about half a mile from the Temple. Doesn't sound like very far to us but imagine a blind man navigating half a mile on foot through a crowded area. This was not a trivial undertaking. There had to be something that motivated him.

I said that God always takes the initiative and that's true, but it's equally true that

we have our part to play in response. What if the man had not gone and washed? I often wonder how many stories were left out of scripture because they ended right there. Jesus said go wash but they didn't. They refused to play their part and do what God asked of them.

The spiritual life is always this interplay, this connection if you will, between what we do and what God does. Both are necessary in the divine economy of things.

Verses 8 through 34 are gospel of John storytelling at its finest. I wish we had time to dig into them but I want to just highlight 3 verses.

In verse 11, the man who can now see refers to "the man called Jesus." At this point in the story, Jesus feels like something of a stranger to him. He can only reference Jesus as "that's what other people call him." The man called Jesus.

In verse 17 he's asked about Jesus again and this time he says "he is a prophet." In that culture, to be a prophet meant that your power derived from God. Maybe the man once blind has had time to think about what's happened to him. Maybe he's understanding some things that weren't clear at the start. Whatever it is, "the man called Jesus" is now somewhat more personal; he's someone whose power comes from God.

In verse 33 the man who can now see says that this man is from God. So now not only does he recognize that Jesus' power is from God but that Jesus himself is somehow from God.

At the end of the story, Jesus once more seeks out the man and asks him in verse 35 "do you believe in the son of man?" Most of the time when this title "son of man" is used of Jesus in the gospels it's connected with Jesus' role as the ultimate judge at the end of time. In v39 Jesus will say I came into this world for judgment. As the ultimate judge Jesus is claiming the title of Messiah, the long awaited one who will usher in the end of time and God's reign on earth.

Even here, though, the man says "who is he that I might believe in him." Jesus has to explicitly state "I am he."

This is a gradual opening, a gradual coming to understand. A gradual making of

connections.

The gospel of John has a number of places where people are described as “beginning to believe.” A lot of times we think belief in God is a one time thing. We believe and that’s that. I think we’d have a lot less grief along the way if we understood that the development of our belief is a lifelong affair. We only gradually understand who Jesus is over a lifetime and, even then, we can never fully understand everything about him. Today we might understand and believe at a certain level and we might think we’re pretty solid and pretty deep. But a year from now we’ll look back and realize today is just a beginning. Our belief and understanding begin at God’s initiative. Both require an investment of ourselves, they require our active participation. And they both require a lifetime of that interplay.

The man in today’s story begins like we all do: in darkness and ignorance. The healing touch that Jesus initiates helps move him into enlightenment but it is a gradual understanding that requires the man’s cooperation. The primary question I want to leave you with today is this:

Will you be like the Pharisees who are content to remain closed off in darkness and blindness?

Or will you be like the man who responds to God’s initiative with cooperation, who continues to probe and challenge and open himself to the God who loves him until he understands and begins to believe?