

Sermon – 4th Lent
John 9:1-41
March 26, 2017

“Have You Seen Him Too?”

If you ever threw on the lights in the middle of the night after you've been sleeping you know very well what I mean when I say sight is something that has to be adjusted to. So imagine the shock to the system of the man in this story whose eyes see things for the very first time. He has heard the voice of his parents, but doesn't know what they or any human looks like. He has heard the sound of trees swaying in the breeze; he has smelt the aroma of a flower in bloom, but would not know them by sight. In one immediate sense he remains blind – even after Jesus heals him, for while he can see he cannot identify what he sees. Since so much of sight involves memory, of knowing how to put your own feet forward when walking down a hill or finding a step on your own or knowing your house from a maze of others, or a friend from across the street absent his voice, this man has a lot to learn.

Sadly, his encounter with the religious leaders of his people shows him a lot about that religion that he may wished he had never seen. This blind young man may have had some inkling that he was the victim of sin - that was pretty common Jewish teaching in those days, so he may have known and accepted his place. But if he'd *heard* Jesus before he'd *seen* him, he also would have heard of the God who in mercy healed sinners. Any wonder then that with his sight came the assumption that his sin or that of his parents was now forgiven by God? Any wonder that it may have befuddled him that the same religious leaders were so reluctant to accept his good fortune and his testimony... citing the established but hard to fathom explanation that his healing occurred outside the accepted norms of Jewish law? A young man finally had a genuine, life-changing encounter with God, and some representatives of God want to rain on the parade.

This story calls us to consider how we may, or may not receive folks who come to faith apart from our common traditions. Several years ago a guy by the name of Jeff Bethke made a splash with his YouTube video entitled “*Why I hate religion but love Jesus.*” It was sort of a rant about a what has come to be known as “organized religion.” Despite my temptation to say “oh, so you like “disorganized” religion better”, I took his thoughts to heart, because I like you know that today's average American is into God a lot more than they are in church. Whenever pollsters ask folks about their religious attitudes, it's rare to find anybody that does not claim to be a believer. One pollster said *‘If people are to be taken at their word, virtually everyone in the general population has a passionate and abiding faith in God. But there is at the same time a huge volume of passionate and abiding faith doing something else on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings’*.

Over 90 percent of our nation's emerging generations, called Millennials and Gen X'rs describe themselves as believers, but many like Mr. Bethke do not express that religious belief in church. Present company excepted, less than 1 in 7 of them attend a worship service including 1 in 6 kids raised in a church environment. But's it's not all on them. When asked, these “*emerging generations*” often respond to the “*tell me about your faith*” question this way; “*the church we usually didn't attend growing up was Catholic...or Methodist...or Lutheran*”.

The church today no longer serves as the main social crossroads of the community. In a “*pre-television/internet/netflix*” world the church was not only a worship center but also a community center, where neighbors gathered, recipes traded, rumors started and (hopefully) dispelled, great quantities of hot dish consumed and newcomers welcomed – into what that congregation traditionally did that is. And oh, did I mention it was a place where the presumption that Christianity exclusively was true was shared by everyone?

But now, Starbucks, booster groups of all kinds and blogs galore have replaced all that. Moreover television and videos easily outperform most worship services in their power to attract and hold attention – notwithstanding the dynamism of we preachers (thank you very much! ☺). And yet, a good many people today will give church a chance, if they can see a church that is interested in hearing their experience of God. The challenge is for that church to welcome that story, give seekers some space to reflect upon it, and only then offer to enhance – or connect it, with the story we call the faith of the Apostles.

The theme of this story from John’s gospel seems to be “Jeff Bethkeist” - Jesus versus the institution. But there is a serious problem with this view too. And that problem is Jesus himself, who gives no support for the view that you can pit individual Christian experience against his church and its historic teachings. Astoundingly, the first thing he does to the man after his conversion is give him a religion lesson. In John chapter 10 Jesus challenges the idea of individualized Christianity by talking about the importance of being part of the community, the now famous “*sheepfold*” of which Jesus alone is the true shepherd. There, those belonging to God are, to borrow that unpopular word - "organized" into a community who hears the Shepherd’s voice and sees a God they can trust.

The thrust of this story is not God versus institutional church, not a living experience with Christ versus rigid creeds. What this story calls us to do is think about the kind of church, yes even and most especially here at Calvary, that we ought to be, the style of leadership and teachings we ought to nurture, the nature and availability of the ministries we ought to offer and above all who we listen to when we determine those things. Well, first and foremost we will listen to Jesus – seeking his mind and copying his manner the best we can. We ought to ask “*does this square with Scripture*” – yes, but we had better also ask “*does this or does it not represent Jesus, a friend of sinners.*” Yet this story from John calls us to keep in mind that those we offer Christ may not have seen much of the church that bears his name growing up. And it calls us to enough Christ like humility to concede that what these young generations may have seen they may not have understood, much less agreed with.

That is vital to us in this congregation. “*Sharing the life changing message of Jesus*” is our congregation’s vision. “*All I know is that I was blind, and now I see*” is a pretty good place from which to start doing that is it not? Let us pray: *Good Lord Jesus, who opened the eyes of our hearts to believe, give us vision to touch anyone who may not see you, that your church may clearly show them what grace, truth, and love look like.* AMEN

