



# Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

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SERMON – 4<sup>TH</sup> LENT

JOHN 9:1-41

MARCH 19, 2023

**“WAS BLIND BUT NOOOOW I SEE!!”**

John 9 is the story of young man who, never having had sight, had a limited perception of the physical world – what color or shape was – what tall or short, wide or narrow, deep or shallow meant. Tell him something was beautiful, and he'd be at a loss. He had other senses, but no image to relate what things that had odor or texture or sounded pleasant or frightening were – no way to distinguish a piece of bread from a piece of fruit - no way of understanding the darkness he lived in because he had no conception of what light was. He couldn't perceive of or distinguish himself from any other person.

Throw on the lights in the middle of the night after you've been sleeping and you know what I mean - sight must be adjusted to. Imagine the shock to the system of the man in this story whose eyes see things for the very first time. He knew the voice of his parents but wouldn't recognize them - the sound of trees swaying in the breeze; the aroma of a flower in bloom but would not know them by sight. Even after he is healed, he is sort of blind – he sees but cannot identify.

Sadly then, his encounter with religious leaders of his people shows him things about religion 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 common Jewish teaching in those days, so he may have known and accepted his place. Then again, Leviticus 19:14, which comes just four verses before the famous command *“love your neighbor as yourself”*, reads *“you shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind...”*

If this fellow had *heard* Jesus before he'd *seen* him, he would have heard of the God who healed sinners – without any action on their part. He might have put two and two together and concluded that with his sight he and his parents were forgiven. Any wonder it befuddled him that religious leaders refused to accept his good fortune and testimony - citing an established but hard to fathom explanation that his healing occurred outside the accepted norms of Jewish law?

A guy named Jeff Bethke made a splash with his YouTube video about a decade ago entitled *“Why I hate religion but love Jesus.”* It was a bit of a rant about what has come to be known as *“organized religion.”* Despite my initial temptation to say *“oh, so you like “disorganized” religion better”*, I took his thoughts to heart, because it is all too well established that today's average American is into God more than they are into church. The trends of the 1990's, 2000's and 2010's are still trending.

20 years ago, 90 percent of our nation's emerging generations, called Millennials and Gen X'rs described themselves as believers – today that figure is 56%. And many like Mr. Bethke do not express that religious belief in church (the latest and most famous of which, if you've read his personal memoir *“Spare”* is Prince Harry) In a *“pre-television/internet/Netflix”* world the church was not only a worship center but also a community center, where neighbors gathered, recipes were traded, rumors started and (hopefully) dispelled, great quantities of hot dish consumed and newcomers welcomed – into what that congregation traditionally did that is. And it was a place where the presumption that Christianity exclusively was true was shared by everyone.

But now, Starbucks, Tic Tok, booster groups of all kinds and blogs galore have replaced that. 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! J). And yet, a good many people today will give church a chance, including “Gen Z’ers” - if they can see a church interested in hearing *their* experience of God – which for most occurred outside the church. That is different by the way, from defining faith solely as “experience”, as the church grounded in Scripture (rightfully) opposes. The challenge is for the church to welcome their story, give them some space to reflect upon it – honestly, openly, and only then offer to enhance – or connect it, with the story we call the faith of the Apostles.

The theme of the story today from John’s gospel seems to be “Jeff Bethkeist” - Jesus versus the institution – God acting outside the confines of tradition and theology to whip his people back into shape. The prophet Isaiah might even nod at that. But there is a 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 teachings.

Astoundingly, the first thing he does to the man after his conversion is give him a religion lesson. Listen to the questions in this story...“*what do you have to say about him...he is a prophet*” “*Do you believe in the Son of Man...who is he sir, tell me that I may believe in him.*” The best he could do, and it was pretty darn good, is say “*one thing I do know...I was blind but now I see.*” (yes, John Newton borrowed that line for “Amazing Grace.”)

But in John chapter 10 Jesus challenges the idea of individualized Christianity by talking about the importance of being part of the community, the “*sheepfold*” of which Jesus alone is 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. No, the thrust of our story today 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 how people who now see, or be starting to see Jesus can be told what it is they see, and why it matters.

66% of U.S. teenagers today self-identify as Christian. About the same percentage say they trust the bible to steer them to Jesus. The question is how to supply those teens with what they need to move from openness to Jesus to commitment to him. The other night at our men’s bible study, we were talking about a spiritual revival occurring among students at Asbury College in Kentucky. A question in our bible study asked, “how do we know something is of the Holy Spirit.” When someone says “the spirit prompted me” how do we know it’s true. I offered this...“*does it square with Scripture*” – but we had better also ask “*does it or does it not sound like, represent, or give glory to Jesus, a friend of sinners.*”

“*Living and sharing the life changing message of Jesus*” is our congregation’s vision. I like it. If you should ever decide you want to replace it though, might I suggest we say of ourselves “*All we know is that we were blind, but now we see.*”

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, or do not see you clearly, or correctly, that your church may show them what grace, truth, and love look like.* AMEN