

Lent 4A 2017, John 9:1-41, March 26, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Like a vast road map stretched out in front of you, with many different possibilities of venues from travel certain passages of scripture lay out before us multiple possibilities for us to travel. Each road will show us something different and yet it will be impossible to explore them all, especially in the short time we have this morning. But at least allow me to suggest to you some of the different roads that are possible for us this morning.

First, the man who is born blind raises the relationship of a physical disability or disease to morality. "Did this man sin or his parents?" the disciples ask. Then there's Jesus' power to work miracles and how he goes about it, in this case making a kind of anointing paste out of dirt and his own spit. We then are led into conflict with the religious authorities who refuse to recognize a healing outside of normal methods. We might then wonder about the relationship of physical disability and the obstacles that are faced on the road towards a healthy contribution towards community. Then we see the healed man's growing faith as he sees for who this Jesus is; first as the man who healed him, then as a prophet, next as one sent by God and finally with that all-important title "Son of Man." This man's simple, yet powerful testimony to the Pharisees about Jesus leads them to excommunicate him; throw him out of the community. The Pharisees, these guardians of important religious traditions, refuse to see the source of Jesus' work, and so they remain blind to their own their culpable sin.

That's a lot for one passage from scripture, almost too much. So one thing I need to say right off the start is that no one sermon can or should say everything about a single biblical text. Like a deep well, in fact like that healing pool of Siloam in which the blind man washed, we can keep coming back to drink deeply from these waters. They are, as Jesus said last week, living waters which sustain and refresh us and which will never run dry. So the direction I go today is not the only one possible, nor may it even be the most important one.

Most of you will certainly remember the great R&B singer Ray Charles. Even if you are from a younger generation, you will undoubtedly recognize his songs when they are played on the radio. His cover of the great Hoagy Carmicheal song, "Georgia On My Mind," is one of his most famous for which he won four Grammy awards. Born to a dirt-poor sharecropper's family in the state of Georgia, Ray Charles started to go blind at the age of five. By the age of seven he could no longer see. It may have been glaucoma or the psychological trauma of witnessing his own brother's death or a combination of both. At an early age he demonstrated a remarkable musical ability; first by learning classical piano and several other instruments at school for the blind. He always loved the gospel music he heard at church and the jazz music he heard in clubs around his home. Ray Charles was a musical genius, a pioneer in the fusion of rhythm and blues and gospel. He was a complicated man, who often fought his own personal demons; a maverick in music, a drug abuser, unfaithful to his wife, a brilliant musician and an artist who was able to exercise artistic control over his own career at a time when other musicians were exploited by unscrupulous managers. In short, he was a very complex man, brash, indisputably talented, at times angry at God who, if not causing his blindness, did nothing to cure it. It seems throughout his whole life he sought love and redemption.

In the biographical film "Ray" there is a scene depicting an incident from the early 1960's outside an auditorium in the state of Georgia. Ray Charles is gaining immense popularity, not just with black audiences, but white as well. This being the heart of the old Jim Crow South of strict segregation, only white people are allowed on the dance floor while all who are black

will be kept in their seats. Ray seems to shrug it off, saying that's just the way things are in the south of Jim Crow and segregation. He's bound by his own inner blindness to any possibility of changes. But then something happens inside, and Ray starts to see how he might become a positive force for changing the rules of segregation. He refuses to play the show and any other show wherever whites and blacks will be segregated. For this stance he is banned from playing auditoriums in the state of Georgia, which is especially ironic because it's that great song "Georgia on My Mind" that has made Ray so popular. Later, in an act of reconciliation that shines with the light of redemption, the Georgia state legislature issues an apology to Ray and they designate "Georgia on My Mind" the state song.

Ray Charles never regained his physical sight, but something of his own blindness was lifted as he began to see the injustices of racial segregation. Through his courage and his music he helped others see as well. It took decades. The healing didn't happen overnight. Today there are those who are still blind. They are blind to their own blindness as the Pharisees were in the gospel reading today. They thought they could see things perfectly. They are the keepers of their traditions and heritage, just as those who kept the traditions of Jim Crow segregation and still try to hold onto that heritage today. But they cannot see. They refuse to see in the ways God sees. Our first reading illustrates how God sees beyond what we see. Samuel the prophet is sent by God to anoint a new king for Israel. Samuel sees the big, strong men and believes they surely must be God's chosen to lead the nation. But God says to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." We are most blind when we refuse to see others as God sees them. We will often look at them from human eyes; are they beautiful, and young and thin? Are they successful and rich? But God looks into the heart, into the soul, into what might be called "character." Our ways of seeing might be the ways someone gets on television or elected to office. What would happen if we started to try to see others as God sees them? What would that mean for our popular entertainment or our politics?

God doesn't want any of us to be blind to the way God sees. Not right thinking, tradition promoting Pharisees; nor those blind to the goodness and beauty of those of different race, or culture or nationality, or economic status, or physical ability. For God the Father sees his children as they truly are. We are the ones who divide, categorize, profile, separate and segregate. We look and make judgments upon their appearances, valuing stature or beauty according to certain ideals. That's not how God sees. It's not how Jesus looked upon the man born blind, forced to live at the city gates, begging for food. He was forced to do so because when others looked at him they could only see an unfortunate and cursed disabled man, pushed to the outside to beg for a few scraps of daily bread, rather than the beautiful child of God created in God's own image.

Jesus is declared "Son of Man" by the man healed of his blindness. His eyes were opened to God's vision of true humanity. This title "Son of Man" may be better understood as "Son of Humanity." Jesus opens our eyes to see us as we truly are: created in God's image, loved and blessed by God. Where the old blind world sees disability and disease we see true humanity and beauty. "Be Thou My Vision, O Lord of My Heart," we sing. To see as God sees. To see humanity as God sees. To see the Son of Man as he sees us. Amen.