

“What Do You Say About Him?”

John 9:1-17

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As I imagined our time together this morning, I thought about the excellent work being done right now in the Tuesday morning Bible class. In September, we started moving through the Gospel of John and now, eighteen weeks later, we are half way through chapter thirteen! The students in this class are like those miners who rushed to California when gold had been discovered there! They are rolling up their sleeves, leaving no stone unturned, no question un-pursued, no truth un-reflected.

One of the pivotal stories in this Gospel is the healing of the blind man in chapter nine. On one level, it is a marvelous healing story of a man born blind. On another level, it is a confrontational story challenging those who are spiritually blind to “open” the eyes of the heart in order to “see” that God’s hope for the world is revealed in the Christ.

As the community in the Bible story moves beyond its astonishment that the blind man has received his sight, one question persists in everyone’s mind: who is this healer? A charlatan or a savior? A trickster or the real deal? A phony bologna or God’s own son?

Eventually, the healed one is brought before the local authorities and required to tell his story about the mud in his eyes. And the authorities press him, insisting, “What do you say about him?” This question is what makes it a pivotal story, a tipping point. For the Gospel writer, the man now-healed becomes the proverbial ‘everyman’ or ‘everywoman’.

It is for each of us to ponder and to come to terms with this ancient question: what do I say about him?

This is not a test question as if there were a right and a wrong answer, an answer that will be graded. It is a spiritual question that presses us, within the church family, to reflect on who this Jesus is and what claim, if any, he has on our lives.

I've noticed that as our grown children have found time to spend with their grandmother, she has a way of quizzing them about the significant others in their lives, the boy friends and the girl friends. 'Is she the one you'll marry? Is he the one you love? Does she feel the way you do?' She is unabashed in her pressing these questions. Though the adult grandchildren squirm a bit with these questions and often give evasive answers, there is a blessing that comes with pressing the question. It's as if she is aware that this new love relationship is making a difference in the grandchild's life, and she is pressing them to name how the relationship is transformational because there is something sacred about naming this difference that certain people are making in our lives.

This is what's going on in John's Gospel in chapter nine. The man born blind has had an encounter like none other, an encounter with love, not romantic love, but the love that makes one whole. He's met someone who is finally enabling him to see as he has never seen, to perceive as he has never perceived, to be alive as he has never been alive! Thus, John places upon the lips of one of the story's characters this pressing question, 'what do you say about him?' The healed man is afraid to say in public who he really thinks Jesus is. He is afraid because he senses those asking the question are not honest. He senses a trap. So he replies with a very neutral, "He is a prophet." This answer can get him into no serious trouble with the authorities.

Unlike the man healed of his blindness, I have nothing to fear here. I have been healed of many kinds of blindness, but my public testimony will not put me in jeopardy with local officials. At least, I hope not! So, I thought I would share with you just one of the many things I can say, for sure, about who Jesus Christ is for me, one way he has helped me to see more clearly.

He has been my best teacher. He is the one who taught me to see that ministry is not some fancy word reserved for people who wear white collars or who have been to seminary or who have the title Reverend before their name. He taught me that ministry is for everyone in the church family. Everybody has a ministry! He taught me that ministry happens where life is raw, where wounds are oozing, where tears are leaking, where fears are paralyzing, where shame is eating away at the soul, where bad things happen to good people, and where the darkness has gotten the upper hand. Therefore, in order to do ministry one must go to those raw places.

There was a time when I thought ministry was done exclusively by Rev Gilbert or Rev Peacock in a white steepled building on a lovely green in the center of a picturesque New England town. I was wearing a blindfold at the time. Then I actually started reading through those stories in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And there on the pages of those Gospels was Jesus Christ...in the raw places: with the mentally ill, with the lepers, with the outcasts, with the prostitutes, with the tax collectors, with the homeless, with the hungry, with the broken-hearted. It was as if he had grabbed me by the sleeve of my jacket and marched me outside the building and splashed some mud on my face, and opened my eyes to the raw places of humanity.

What do I say about him? I say he is the Teacher who makes it abundantly clear that each one of us has a ministry and then gives us a gentle shove out the front door where life is raw.

So, I am thrilled beyond words that on the fourth Sunday of each month a team of ministers goes out from here to Salmon Brook Convalescent Home where, let me tell you, life can be very raw. These ministers lead a service of worship. They push the wheel chairs and they listen to the stories and they hold someone's hand.

I am thrilled beyond words that dozens of teenagers spent the last twenty-four hours experiencing the cold and the desperation of homelessness. They could have gone on television or on the Brad Davis radio show and talked about homelessness in the comfort of a studio, but no, not these young adults. They chose to go out there, through the night, where life is raw.

I am thrilled that thirty two adults are headed for Biloxi, Mississippi in March to meet people in the rawness caused by Hurricane Katrina. Roofs have caved in and wallboard has molded and trees have been uprooted and lives are still of hold.

I am thrilled that many of you are knitting prayer shawls that will find their way to cancer patients receiving chemo-therapy, to patients waiting for transplants, and to neighbors who are grieving bitterly. Each shawl is knit with a prayer that God will use it where life is raw.

I am thrilled that somebody noticed how lovely are the beaded bracelets of Lakota artists and decided to makes them available for sale at coffee hours here so that life won't be quite so raw on the Cheyenne River Reservation.

I am thrilled that right here in our buildings: people with addictions find sobriety through the ministry of AA. People in mid-life transitions find support. Working parents find day-care for their Kindergarten-aged children. People with eating addictions find hope at Overeaters Anonymous.

And families in crisis find reliable therapy. Sometimes, life is raw right here within our walls!

I am thrilled that people of all ages who find their way to South Church are having these same encounters with Christ, seeing as I have seen that ministry is for everyone! That ministry happens wherever the fabric has worn thin, wherever the pain can be hidden no longer, wherever the cry for wholeness is heard.

The question arising out of John's story in chapter nine, 'what do you say about him?' is a question intended for everyone who seeks to live by faith. It is not a test question. It is a spiritual question. It's in the wrestling with this question that many have found meaning and great joy and a purpose for their living. In the greatest of hope, Amen!