

John 9:1-41    Pastor Bill Uetrict    3/26/17    4 Lent

I was taken in this past week by the obvious observation by blogger John Petty that life is a conversation—a conversation that has been going on before we made an entrance onto the scene, a conversation that will continue after we exit the scene, a conversation that right now we are privileged to enter.

This insight rang true for me as I was confronted with the reality that the word translated “man” in our gospel reading is simply the word that means “human being.” There is no definite article—the word *the*—before it. Could it be that the “man born blind” is a way of talking about all humans, all of us? That may be a stretch in terms of translating John’s story, but the insight is compelling to me. Could it be that when we look at the man in John today we are looking at all of us? By the way, that is certainly true when it comes to the name “Adam” in the book of Genesis. To say, “There goes Adam” is to say, “There goes all of us!” Maybe the conversation that surrounds the man born blind and his healing by Jesus is the conversation that all of us are invited into, or more accurately, the conversation that we are involved in all the time.

Let’s begin at the beginning: “As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who had been blind since birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents?’” You see, it is quite easy for some to figure out why people get heart disease. Well, they must have eaten too much bacon, too many processed meats, too much fat, too many carbohydrates, too much sugar—or whatever the latest dietary analysis concludes. But it’s hard to pin blame on the individual when he’s been born blind. How can you blame him for that? Maybe it’s his parent’s fault. Maybe they ate too much fat. Maybe they drank too much liquor, used cocaine.

This kind of conversation is a conversation that ancient people were particularly preoccupied with. But we’re still involved in it today. We’re constantly trying to diagnosis why what happens to people

happens. And truthfully, we always feel a lot better when we can diagnose why. I suppose it helps distance us from the sadness and tragedy that we are dealing with. Maybe this all won't happen to me because I don't eat bacon; I wear my seat belt; I don't smoke. Frankly, it's somewhat of a cheap approach to the conversation. Now, as one who doesn't eat bacon, never has smoked, and wears a seat belt, I want to advocate for my approach. I suspect you might live longer because of it, or at least you might be able to ride your bike for more miles during the conversation you call life, and you might be a less of a drain on the costly health care system while you are alive. But there are no guarantees. To evaluate people and situations on the basis of who sinned or didn't is not particularly helpful.

That's what Jesus says. In the midst of the argument that the disciples are having, Jesus says, "Oh, please. This is not the conversation I want to have. It isn't about the man's sin or the parent's sin. It's about what God can do through this man. You are going to be surprised by how God's glory will shine through him. Get to work eliminating suffering, not figuring out who is responsible for it."

So Jesus does as he urges his disciples to do: he heals the man. He spits and mixes the spittle with a little mud, placing the mix on his eyes, granting sight to the man. Jesus' ministry is about healing. It's about enabling people who can't see to see. The conversation that we are entering into is a conversation about healing. It's about we who have been born blind being able to see.

Much to our surprise not everyone recognizes that they are born blind. Jesus at the end of our reading for today says that he came into the world for judgment, for an experience of crisis, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.

The conversations we are involved in often reveal that some of us don't get that we could use correction for our vision. We think that our vision is twenty-twenty. Just ask us; we'll tell you. We know how the world operates. We know who the good guys and the bad guys are. We know who is in and who is out. Who know who God is and what

God expects. We have it all figured out. Too bad other people don't. Too bad that they don't see the world as we see it. Too bad that they are not all Lutherans.

In today's reading, we meet two somewhat contentious groups of folks—two groups that are struggling with the new conversation that Jesus seems to want to engage people in, two groups that are having to figure out if they really want to see differently. The first group is the neighbors. They are grappling with each other over the identity of the one who was healed. Some think it is the guy they knew. Some don't. Must be another person, some of the neighbors assert.

Isn't it interesting how sometimes the people we talk about are folks we don't know well enough to identify. We are so busy talking about them we don't look at them in the face. This happens with people with disabilities all the time. This happens all the time with homeless people who are walking our streets, with folks who are a different color than us, with strangers and foreigners. We tend not to look at them. We tend to cast our vision elsewhere. It's easier if we don't look at them, talk to them directly, hear their stories directly. But we can still talk *about* them, or seek some news source to give us information about them. Oh, the conversation suffers!

The second group of folks in the text who are struggling with the new thing that is going is a bunch of Pharisees. These people—some very religious people, the kind you would really like to hang around with—are not so much struggling with the man who had formerly been blind, but with this Jesus guy, who seems to see in a very different way than they do. They are unnerved by his vision, by his audacity to heal on the Sabbath. “Now look, if this man were from God,” they say, “He would be keeping the Sabbath, wouldn't he? I mean, religious people follow the rules, don't they?”

A schism develops between the Pharisees as they discuss this matter. Schisms almost always develop among people who are not open to new conversation partners. We are so busy trying to keep other people out that we even turn hostile to our own people. Oh

wow, the conversation is weighed down. Oh wow, it could be much more interesting and life-giving!

You know, it's interesting that while all these folks are struggling with the man who had been blind and with what happened to him, he is simply rejoicing in the fact that he can see. He says to the folks who are talking about him, "You can argue all you want about who this Jesus man is, but this one thing I know: I was blind, but now I see! You seem to be worried about what party he comes from, if he thinks the right way, if he is religious in the way that you are, but all I know is that he opened my eyes. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

Well, at this point, the grumbling religious folks have had enough. And they do what many folks who are in power and even some who are not in power do. They dismiss the blind man. They attack his person: "You were born entirely in sins, and you are trying to teach us."

Oh, how often the conversation looks like that. In fact, it is conversation that is going on in the political realm all the time right now. Some have gotten it down to a science. You attack the person who is trying to help you see better or at least see differently. Oh, don't take his opinion seriously; he's nothing but a loser. She's a disaster. He's an idiot. Wow! There's a conversation killer.

Undoubtedly, our gospel story for today was written to address not Jesus' time, but the audience of John the gospel writer. He wrote this gospel at the time in the church's history (around 90 A.D.) when Christian Jews were being driven out of the synagogue. You see, the early church didn't meet in churches. It met in synagogues. Early Christians were thought to be reformed Jews. As these early reformed Jews were being pushed out of the synagogues, many would-be followers of Jesus placed themselves on the fence. They weren't so sure in light of potential persecution whether they wanted to fully converse with Jesus and his people. John's gospel was written to urge them to get off the fence, to come into the Jesus' movement.

Now that was threatening obviously, but simply because of potential persecution. It was threatening to how many of these folks saw, how they viewed the world, how they viewed God.

You need to understand: to follow Jesus is to see differently, is to be involved in a whole new conversation. To follow Jesus is to be brought into a crisis. He, according to the Gospel of John, is the new thing that God is doing. To converse with him, to follow him, is to be opened to that newness, to be blinded when you think that you see perfectly, and to be given new sight when you know nothing but blindness.

To follow him means that the conversation that life is will never be the same again for you or for me. It's a conversation that will cause you to say, "I have been born again, born from above, born anew by the wild Spirit, the energy of God." That energy, by the way, is the energy of love. Love is seeking to make you new. And love is about ready to go the cross, where in John Jesus will be lifted up for the whole world to see. What we will see there is what has been seen from before the beginning of time: love that is after the whole world. Wow, that love will certainly change the conversation! I think, it will make it a whole lot more meaningful, and can I say, a whole lot more fun.