

“An Out of Control God?”

John 9:1-41

April 3, 2011

Pastor Tom Williams

Madison is a very political culture and in the last few months has been even more so. As I've thought about how to be pastoral in this situation and yet also prophetic, as I think ministers are called to be, I keep running into this problem called the Bible and sermonizing. Now sermons are often pastoral and even occasionally prophetic but either should be done, I think, only when one is honest with and seeks to be faithful to the text from which one is preaching. And as someone who seeks to preach from the lectionary, that can create real problems. This sermon is the third or fourth one written this week from this text as I sought to be true to it, pastoral, and prophetic. And each sermon got derailed due to the reality of this worshiping community injecting itself into them.

First, one of the retired ministers who worships with us wandered into my office and a ten minute conversation derailed sermon one. Then the next day a staff person stopped in and that conversation shredded sermon two. And then I went with a member to take communion to a group of people who live at a retirement facility and sermon three drifted off to the land of electronic ether! But then, I was saved by National Public Radio! Traveling home I heard a Texas politician talking about immigration bills being considered by the Texas Legislature and how they needed to be passed because new immigrants voted for Democrats and therefore didn't matter. What mattered was making his Republican base happy! That statement in and of itself really angered me but it also encapsulates the difficulty of living in this country, this state, and this nation right now and wanting to be involved with the political and yet do so out of a faith perspective or faith commitment.

We have moved from a politics based in the writings of John Locke, John Stuart Mill, David Hume, Thomas Hobbes, and others to a politics based on Vince Lombardi-isms. We have moved from a political arena in which ideas regarding how a society might embody justice and the good to one in which the only thing to be considered is how my side can win. What Christians, people of faith ought be concerned with is justice and not winning, love and not domination. But this culture doesn't want to talk about justice or love. It just wants to consider how “my side” can win! Christians get pushed aside because it isn't winning we care about but justice and love and how we can embody God's presence in our lives and in this society. Now unfortunately, this is not a new problem. It actually precedes Locke, Mill, et. al. And that brings me to the Johanine reading for today.

Now this is a long but really pretty simple story. Jesus and his posse, group, followers are walking along one day, a Saturday to be exact, the Sabbath. They find themselves confronted by a blind beggar. Now one of the groups asks a really tacky question and Jesus offers an answer that is almost as tacky. The blindness is caused by whose sin is the question and the answer is that God set this guy up so that Jesus can heal him! Before we go too far into this part of the story let's just accept the story as story and it needs some characters and dialogue to make it work. There is no way I want to think of a God who blinds someone from birth just so that at some time in adulthood he can be healed! That's not the kind of God I want to believe in. In addition, we are confronted with an understanding of disease or disability which is antithetical

to almost everything we believe. Our entire health care system is based on the notion that diseases are the result of toxic substances, germs, microbes, biological distress, and many other causes but not the result of behavior which violates the standards of a divine commandment or expectation, that is sin. From the days of Pasteur on, our mindset has been on discovering and addressing the causes of disease and/or disability with prophylaxis and/or treatment. We don't ask this question regarding anyone's disease or disability even when such is the result of personal lifestyle choices that create risk.

Our story places us directly into a time and place when such was not understood and when disease and disability were viewed as the result of sinful or non-divine pleasing acts. It was evil spirits or an angry god or gods who made one sick. But again this is simply part of the story and reminds us that it is set in a time period, a time in history which had a completely different view of these things than we. And then after healing the blind man by using spit and dirt, symbols of both the creation of humanity from Genesis and the healing power of saliva which was a prevalent belief of the time, the story moves on to the questioning of the man, his parents, and the difficulty of others accepting that this blind beggar now has his sight.

Now that's the summary of this long and involved story which is the sixth of the seven signs performed by Jesus in John's Gospel. It is often simply referred to as Jesus heals a blind man on the Sabbath and does not appear in any other gospel. Often people read this and then get drawn deeply into a theological discussion of the place of miracles in the gospels and the role they play in them. While there may be much to be discussed, I have to say I find myself much more in agreement with Paula Fredriksen's thought in her book Jesus of Nazareth, "the miracles are the medium but the Kingdom is the message".¹ It is not the miracle with which we ought be concerned but the message the story seeks to offer about the Kingdom remembering that the Kingdom is the notion, idea of God's presence being known in our lives or the lives of those who appear in the story. The miracles seek to offer the reader an understanding of what it means to experience God's presence.

Now the story is really about how people often react to God's presence, the presence of the Kingdom. First we have the Pharisees, the representatives of the religious establishment, upset that this could happen. How could someone who is unknown to them do this? And on the Sabbath? Nothing in this vignette makes them happy and they drive out the now sighted, formerly blind beggar. We can gloss over this too quickly if we're not careful but this may be the main point of the story for the original audience.

John wrote to and for a community who, because of their newfound faith in Jesus as Christ, were driven out of the synagogues. We may think of that as a simple act of refusing to let them worship but in reality it was much more than that. The synagogue was the center of the community's life. It was the center of the culture and the place from which one drew one's identity. To be forced from it meant being separated from extended family, economic opportunities, all things which were central to one's identity and life. The idea that one was driven from the synagogue was not an easy or simple act but in fact meant total separation from all that one had known. It was quite literally life threatening and may have later been the basis of the stories of the persecution of the early Christian community as they were separated from their former way of life. To believe that Jesus was the Christ was to be separated from one's

¹ Fredriksen, Paula, Jesus of Nazareth, pg. 114.

culture. And this story seeks to symbolize how the community of believers were being forced from their communities because of their faith just as the newly sighted man was driven from his community, his synagogue due to his faith that it was Jesus who had healed him, given him sight.

And then we have the Pharisees and the blind man's community, those who had known him, both questioning the fact that this sighted one is the blind man. His life is now different and they can't understand how this one who had been a blind beggar is now a fully participating member of the community. Those who participate as a result of God's presence become different from their past beings and they are often not recognized by the community. Or their communities choose not to recognize them. I am not sure which is the truer lesson but they can both be drawn from this story.

So what does that have to do with us in 2011, in Madison? Here's my ideas, briefly, pastorally, prophetically. Politics in this society isn't a welcoming place for Christians or other people of faith to participate because it doesn't want to hear about justice instead of winning, peace instead of domination. Go ahead talk about justice and how justice isn't simply what is good for some but how all members of society might participate fully and see how welcome you are. Justice means the opportunity for all parties in the society to participate and that's not a welcome idea in our society. Elected officials want to be re-elected and not challenged to consider such. Go ahead talk about the services which a society ought offer that all people might be able to eat and have affordable housing and what would be a just way of paying for those services. We've reached a place in our history that such discussions are rejected out of hand because they aren't winners. Participating as one who seeks to respond to God's presence by seeking justice for others, sight for the blind is not a politically winning position. And I fear not one welcome but so needed in this time and this place.

Second, remember the reaction of the community to the blind beggar once he was given his sight. They didn't, couldn't, or wouldn't recognize him. He changed. His behavior changed. And suddenly the community couldn't define who he was. When we participate with God in our lives, we are changed. Our behavior changes and suddenly our communities may not recognize us anymore. We dare think not about the needs of others when entering the political arena of today for such is not a winning formula! What matters is protecting "mine" and such protection means peace must always, always demur to security! Changes in behavior which call for thinking of the needs of others is unwelcome and unwise in today's political climate.

Participation with God changes us. It makes us think and act differently. Often we may fall into the trap that such will inure us to our communities, our societies. The story from John warns us that living out our faith can be dangerous and lead to our being ostracized from those whom we thought we knew and thought knew us. Go in courage. Live out our faith. But do so knowing it won't be welcomed by all. AMEN.