

## **“Blake and the Blind Man”**

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John 9:1-25

Life without Christ is blindness. In the 9<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John’s gospel, it took John 41 verses to say what I just said in five words. If John were preaching today, you better bring a snack! We’re not only going to be late for lunch, we might even be late for happy hour at Sonic, and that starts at 2:00 p.m. Mark tells a similar story in his gospel in five verses. Same story; five verses. John uses 41 verses, but you know what? I like John’s story better. As I said before the scripture reading, John’s story is our story.

Most of us don’t understand about the blind man. We can only imagine how horrible it must have been to have been blind from birth. As a little boy, this man had sat on his mother’s lap. He had felt her warmth, he had smelled her fragrance, he had heard her voice, he had literally tasted her milk of human kindness, but he had never looked into her eyes and seen her love for him. He was blind from birth.

When the disciples saw the man, they said to Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” It was a belief among the Jews that someone must have sinned to have caused this. Jesus would have none of this. He cared less about a theological discussion and more about the man. What happened next was strange, wasn’t it? Did you notice, in some accounts we notice that after Jesus has healed someone he says to them, “Your faith has made you well.” That was not the case here. This man didn’t even know who Jesus was. He had no faith. At times, Jesus would simply speak a word and someone would be healed. At other times he would place his loving hands on someone and they would be healed. In this strange story, he spits on the ground and makes mud. This story, in Mark’s gospel, you might remember that Jesus makes the mud and puts the mud on the man’s eyes and after he washes, Jesus asks him, “What do you see?” And the man says, “I see men but they look like trees walking.” It is the story of second sight, of second touch that sometimes we need from Christ.

First lesson from the story: *If you want to serve God, you better be ready to get your hands dirty.* If you’re not willing to get down in the mud, get down where the real stuff of life is, you might think about serving some other kind of god. The second lesson from the story: There is no cookie-cutter approach to faith. Jesus reached out to persons in different ways. I told Charles Hargrove I was going to mention him in this sermon this morning. Charles said, “Does that mean I need to stay awake, then?” That would be a good idea.

I appreciate all that Charles does to reach out to visit those persons who visit our church. Imagine this if you will. A woman goes to see Charles. She is having trouble with her vision. Charles tests her eyes; obviously there is some kind of problem. After he is done with the test, he takes off his glasses and hands them to the woman and says, “Try my glasses. I think they might work for you. They work great for me.” The woman tries the glasses and obviously they don’t

work; her prescription is different from Charles'. She says, "These don't work at all." Charles says, "Well, you're not very grateful." So he calls Mary Ann in and says, "Let's try Mary Ann's glasses, see if they work for you."

Do you realize we have tried that cookie-cutter approach in the church. "If you want to come to our church, you need to worship the way we worship. We don't care if you worship anywhere, but if you come here, you need to be like us." I don't see anywhere in the Bible where Jesus says we need to do that. He said a lot about being like him. He tried new and innovative things. We try new and innovative things in the church, not to be different, but because it might mean reaching one person for Christ that we might not otherwise reach. There is no cookie-cutter approach to faith.

Can you imagine if something like this happened today? A man born blind from birth goes to a faith healer and suddenly he sees? We would see those trucks with the satellite dishes lined up outside the man's house, wouldn't we? CNN would be there. Matt Lauer from *The Today Show* would be there to try to interview the man. Barbara Walters would try to set up an interview with the man. Soon after that, *Saturday Night Live* would do a skit about Barbara Walters interviewing the man. You could imagine what she would say. The man's name would be Robert Ripley and he would work at Roto-Rooter. Barbara Walters would stand in front of the Roto-Rooter shop and say, "I'm Ba Ba Wa Wa at the Woto-Wooter shop and I'm going to interview Wobert Wipley." Did you know that early in her career, a network executive told Barbara Walters that she would never make it because of her speech impediment? I wonder where that guy is now?

We have all kinds of labels for people don't we? Parents can be the worst at that kind of thing. Parents can put a label on one child, another label on another child, and those kids are stuck with that label. Sometimes they never overcome the label that their parents give to them. Grown children can label their aging parents and it becomes a sad thing. Spouses—the very ones who said "I will love you and no other," can put a label on their spouse and the marriage is never the same.

The Pharisees were good at this. I heard a phrase recently that I haven't heard for a while. It was during a political discussion, and one of the pundits said, "Do you remember Agnew's phrase, "The nattering nabobs of negativity?" I hadn't heard that in years. "The nattering nabobs of negativity." These guys were the "Muttering meatheads of myopia." The Pharisees were so short-sighted that they were not able to see what had been done, and the saddest part of this story is that this man was expelled from the Temple because he was healed by Jesus. The Pharisees were so unable to overcome their jealousy that in their bitterness they expelled this man from the Temple.

In our lifetime, if we have not done this ourselves, most of us have known those people we call "joy killers." I know some people who are good about mourning with those who mourn, but not so good at rejoicing with those who rejoice. Fred Craddock said this, "The Good News always has enemies." Think about that. "The Good News always has enemies."

If we were to take a poll this morning about whether or not something like this might happen today—that a man from birth could be healed from blindness, I imagine, if we were honest, some of us might say, "Well, I have my doubts." You know, we are pretty sophisticated today. "I have my doubts," some of us might say. We all have our doubts. It is not our job as people of faith to

doubt. Of course we all doubt, but at some point we are called to move beyond our doubts to faith.

I am grateful for the retired ministers we have who are members in this church. They have been so kind and encouraging to me. I know surely they must think to themselves, “This poor guy needs all of the encouragement he can get!” I’ve thought about this. These guys are retired. They served the church for years. They could do anything on a Sunday. They could stay home, sleep in, go somewhere, but they choose to be here worshipping God. Do you suppose they see something, understand something that the rest of us don’t?

I said before that this is our story. But for this to be our story, it means that it is possible for something like this to happen today. I believe our first job, as people of faith, is to confess our own blindness. We might not call it that. We might say, “I have a blind spot.” Do you ever say that about yourself? I know I have some blind spots. I am better at seeing the faults and shortcomings of others than I am in seeing them in myself. That is a blind spot I have. The first step, I believe, toward Christian maturity is to admit our own need for healing. Jesus said those who are well have no need of a physician. I’ve told you before about my physician, Dr. McQuacker. He’s a nice enough guy, but I don’t want to go see him on a regular basis just to visit. I do see him only because I’m sick. So we come to Christ only when we are able to admit, “I need your healing, Lord.”

Two examples of how this is our story today. I have shared briefly with some of you before about the man named Blake. I played with him a few months ago in a Special Olympics Golf Tournament. Blake’s problem is not that he was born that way. He suffered a horrible accident about nine years ago. He and some other boys were in one of these four-wheel vehicles called a Gator. You see them on golf courses; there are bucket seats in the front, and something like a pick-up bed in the back and a roll bar. Blake and another boy were standing in the back of this Gator.

I read the Highway Patrol account from a man about my age who witnessed the accident. He said they weren’t driving fast, they weren’t acting goofy or anything. Some way, somehow, Blake lost his balance and fell out of the vehicle. They were on a county road. It was barely paved. Blake landed at the edge of the road in the dirt. His head hit the side of the asphalt where it was raised, resulting in a horrible brain injury. He was 14 years old at the time.

Suzanne and I went to Children’s Hospital in Oklahoma City with his parents, Steve and Bana, who were our best friends at the time. When the doctor came out he said, “What happened to cause this horrible brain injury?” They told the doctor what had happened and he explained how they had cut out a part of Blake’s skull so that his brain could swell. His brain did swell and literally popped out of his skull.

I learned a lot during that time with Blake. I learned about something called ICP. Blake was in ICU and had all kinds of monitors. One of the monitors monitored his intracranial pressure (ICP). The doctor said if his intracranial pressure got above 60 he could not survive. I sat with Blake in that ICU room and watched that monitor go to 56 . . 57 . . 58 . . 59 . . 60 . . 61 . . 62. I visited with the physician in charge. What could I do as Steve and Bana’s minister to help them? He said, “Well, you know what’s going to happen,” and I said, “No, I don’t know what’s going to happen.

That's why I'm asking you." He said, "Blake's not going to make it. He's not going to survive this."

I will never forget the day when the doctor came in to talk to Steve and Bana about unplugging the machine. That was the decision they faced. Steve said to the doctor, "Doctor, we want to take our son home. That's what we want to do." I'll never forget the look on the doctor's face. It was like saying "Sic 'em" to a hound dog. He said, "That's what we want to hear. We have some new things we haven't tried yet." After months in a coma and more months of rehabilitation, Steve and Bana did take Blake home. His mental age now, at the age of 22, is about the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. He walks with a limp, his hand is curled, his speech is halting. He will live with his parents for the rest of his life, but he is at home.

A story about another blind man that says this is not a story that happened long ago, this is our story. A good friend of mine by the name of Lester Bickford was a disciples minister. I first met Lester Bickford at church camp. I was in Junior High School. Lester Bickford was an old man, the oldest counselor at the camp. He was probably four or five years younger than I am now, but he seemed to be an old man to me.

Lester told the story about the first church he served right out of seminary. One day during the week a man came by to visit with Lester. He said he had a friend who wanted to be baptized, Lester said that was fine, to bring him down to the church. The man said "Well, he's a little reluctant. I've been to a few other churches and asked if they would baptize him during the week because this man wanted to be baptized during the week at a private baptismal service. The other churches said no, we need to baptize him on Sunday so everyone can see. Lester said, "Well you bring the man down and I will baptize him." They set up a time and the man came with his friend who was blind, and Lester baptized the man.

Several weeks later he went to visit the blind man at his home. After they had visited for a while, the blind man asked a fascinating question. He said, "Who was the third man in the baptistry with us?" Lester said, "Well, your friend was there who helped you down in the water, and the blind man said, "No, I don't mean my friend. Who was the other man in the baptistry with us?" Lester told him there wasn't anyone else, there were just the two of them. The blind man said, "No, there was a third man in the baptistry. Didn't you see him?"

I believe that the man Lester baptized and Blake Bogdun would both say to us today, "Life without Christ is blindness." Amen