

## Sermon

# SACRIFICING WHO WE ARE

Given April 3, 2011 at

Caroline Valley Community Church

Text: John 9:1-38

<sup>1</sup> As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" <sup>3</sup> "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. <sup>4</sup> As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup> While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." <sup>6</sup> After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. <sup>7</sup> "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. <sup>8</sup> His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" <sup>9</sup> Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man." <sup>10</sup> "How then were your eyes opened?" they asked. <sup>11</sup> He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see." <sup>12</sup> "Where is this man?" they asked him. "I don't know," he said. <sup>13</sup> They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. <sup>14</sup> Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. <sup>15</sup> Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." <sup>16</sup> Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner perform such signs?" So they were divided. <sup>17</sup> Then they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet." <sup>18</sup> They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. <sup>19</sup> "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?" <sup>20</sup> "We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. <sup>21</sup> But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." <sup>22</sup> His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. <sup>23</sup> That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." <sup>24</sup> A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner." <sup>25</sup> He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" <sup>26</sup> Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" <sup>27</sup> He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" <sup>28</sup> Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! <sup>29</sup> We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from." <sup>30</sup> The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. <sup>32</sup> Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. <sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." <sup>34</sup> To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out. <sup>35</sup> Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" <sup>36</sup> "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him." <sup>37</sup> Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you." <sup>38</sup> Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

Don't you just love stories! This morning's text tells a very interesting story. In his ministry Jesus tells a lot of great stories such as the story that we know as the good Samaritan or the story that we know as the story of the prodigal son. This morning's text is not a story that Jesus tells. Rather it is a narrative related by the writer of John telling us about one of the healings of Jesus.

Jesus is walking out of the temple one day with his disciples. He passes a man who has been blind from birth. The disciples decide to ask Jesus a theological question about this man. Under the assumption that all such physical problems were the result of some sin, the disciples asked Jesus who had sinned and caused this man to be born blind. Was it his mother or father, or had the man committed some sin while he was still an unborn child?

Jesus replies that it was neither: he was born this way so that God's glory might be made known. Jesus then comments to the effect that he, Jesus, must do his work on earth now because his time will soon be over. As he is saying this, Jesus proceeds to spit on the ground, make mud out of his spittle in the dirt there, and put this on the man's eyes. Having done this, Jesus commands the man to go to the pool of Siloam and washes eyes. The man does this and returns able to see.

Now all of this action takes seven verses to describe, and two verses are Jesus talking about who he is and what his mission is. So this is not a long narrative, nor a very involved narrative. But as we are going to see, these few verses contain several mysteries and result in a lot of actions taken by people who were not there even. Let's address the mysteries first.

The first mystery that we have as readers of this text is how did these disciples know that this man had been born blind? Did they know this man? And I must have seen this man before or heard something about this man in order to know that he had been born by. Otherwise, how could they know? We are not told this in the text. We are never told this. We were left wondering whether or not Jesus and the disciples had walked by this man before, perhaps numerous times. And if that was so, why now does this become an issue for the disciples and why now does Jesus decide to heal this man?

The second mystery that we have in this text is the mystery that the disciples were trying to address: what is the cause theologically of physical deformities, and the camps, pain and suffering? And this remains an issue for the church today. Within the last five years a well known Christian evangelical Baptist theologian has rejected Christianity precisely because in his words Christianity does not adequately address the issue of pain and suffering. Jesus says here that this particular man had a handicap, was blind, in order that God might display his glory. As an answer to the idea of pain and suffering, this leaves something to be desired! It does tell us why this happened, but it doesn't feel like a particularly good way explanation. God would cause this man pain for many years of his life, make him a second class citizen, put him through everything he has been through so far in his life, just so Jesus could perform a miracle at this point! This sounds like God is playing with this man's life and it doesn't necessarily feel good to consider this as an exclamation for this man's deformity. But it is what we are left with in this text.

The third mystery in this text is the method of healing. We have been studying and the book of Mark the healings of Jesus, along with the rest of the book of Mark. What we have noticed in our studies in the adult Bible class is that no two healings of Jesus seem identical. Every time Jesus heals someone it's something different. About the closest we get to identical healings are the times when Jesus simply pronounces that the person has been healed. And in this particular narrative we have yet another way the Jesus heals somebody. Jesus spits, makes a clay, and puts it on the man's eyes. Now there are other accounts where Jesus does this, but this is the only one where Jesus follows it up by telling the man to go to someplace else and wash it off. The mystery then is why did he do that with this guy? It becomes even more mysterious when we combine this question with Jesus comment about why this man had been born blind. It appears that when Jesus sends the man to the pool of Siloam, Jesus is testing the man's fate. But if Jesus is testing the man's faith, how does that relate to the idea that the man was born blind so God could show his power in healing the man? If the man had no faith, and did not go to the pool, how would God display his power?

So in only seven verses we have three serious questions. I'm not going to try to answer all three of these today. I just lay them out there for your consideration and careful thought. I want to move on to the responses to this miracle.

The first response of course is the man himself. He goes to the pool and washes his eyes and comes back and can see. But I want you to imagine what it must've been like for

this man to go from the temple to the pool (because we know where he was: at the temple) with his eyes covered with some bags of dirty spit. Imagine if you will that he even had heard the conversation of Jesus and the disciples and heard Jesus say that he had been born blind to show the power of God. Now he's walking through, gingerly tapping his way through the crowds in Jerusalem that killed from the temple to the pool to washes eyes off. How many of us would have been tempted to wipe this mess off our eyes long before we made the mile trip to the pool? How many of us would've been disgusted with what was on our eyes and with the casual way that we had been used by God? How many of us would've said I don't even care if I'm healed, I'm so angry about all of this? So the response of this man is not casual nor easy nor automatic. We look at him and think well if I was blind I would go to the pool. But we look at him while reading this text not while staggering blindly through the streets of Jerusalem with spit on our eyes. But he goes, and returns seeing.

Next we have the response of the people who knew him. Is this the same guy they ask? The man is so changed that some of the people who knew him didn't even recognize him now. Getting his eyesight back made a big difference in this man's life. Inevitably, people come up to him and ask are you the beggar who was blind? How can you see me now? And he answers: yes, it's me. A man healed me. Well, they said, who healed you? I don't know, said the man. So they take him to the Pharisees.

These people seem determined to find out what happened. But they don't seem to be as interested in the welfare of the man healed as they are in discovering the process, finding the healer themselves. The people seem at best too selfish to rejoice with the now seeing man and at worst they seem determined to make something sinister of all this.

The response of the Pharisees is very predictable. They do NOT want to believe this is from God. This healing happened on the Sabbath, so it was WRONG. They even seem to know that it was Jesus that healed him, but that makes them even more determined not to acknowledge the divine quality of the healing. They question the man, and they question his parents to make sure the man was really blind.

The parents are cautious. They know their son has been healed, but they do not want to take part in the religious controversy. So they pass the buck back to their son. They don't want to get caught up in this religious controversy.

Once again the official religious community examines the man who was blind. And this time the man develops an attitude! Why do you keep asking about the man who healed me, he asks. Do you want to be his disciples? And when they press him, the man states that Jesus must be a prophet. At that, they kick the man out of the temple!

When Jesus hears that the man has been thrown out of the temple, he looks up the man. Jesus now reveals to the man that he is Jesus, the Messiah. And the man believes in Jesus, and worships him.

The question for us, of course, is where do we fit into this set of responses? Are we like the man: doing what God tells us to do even when it is not easy and does not feel good? Are we claiming divine healing by walking around with uncomfortable stuff on our face? Are we willing to worship the one who changes our life?

Are we like the crowd: wondering what has happened? Are we curious about this God-stuff, but not decided? Are we only interested in our own lives, and not willing to rejoice with those who have been changed by divine action in their lives?

Or are we like the religious folk of their time: trying to make sure that whatever happens does not contradict our beliefs, our understanding of God's will. Do we work hard to deny God's actions in the lives of others because it did not happen the way we think it should happen? Are we willing to throw others out of church, out of our congregation, because we don't want to see God working in their lives? Have we already made up our minds what God will, and will not, do before we hear the testimonies of others?

Are we like the parents: unwilling to get involved, putting the problems off on others, just wanting to get along? Just where are we in this list of people who responded to this one miracle?

We have been talking during this Lenten season about sacrifice: about taking something profane, ordinary, and turning it into something sacred. When we look at this story, we see Jesus taking ordinary dirt and turning it into divine medicine. We see the man who was healed take an ordinary journey from one point in the city to another and turn it into a test of faith. On the flip side, we see the Pharisees take a miracle and attempt to turn it into something ordinary, or even something bad. We even see the Pharisees punish the man who was healed for his faith. They are a determined group in this story. We see the crowd, the people around him, take what was a miracle and try to turn it into explainable, ordinary, event. This is sort of a reverse sacrifice process!

We have talked on previous Sundays about what was sacrificed. We talked about giving up the mountaintop during the transfiguration event, and we talked about Jesus making sacred a part of his ordinary physical existence. We've talked today about the various ways in which people in this story reacted to this story to either create or stop things from becoming divine. But I want to look a little bit today at what we are challenged to give up when we meet god. The man who was healed is challenged to give up his blindness. The Pharisees are challenged to give up their preconceived ideas about Jesus. The crowd is challenged to believe that a miracle has occurred, to give up their ideas about what was possible. The parents are challenged to take a stand. They are challenged to give up their place in the community.

We need to see them in this story each person is challenged to give up something of how they identify themselves. When we meet god, we are changed! As we can see in this story, some people hold so tightly to what they were that they are unwilling to be changed. A response to God requires that we be willing to sacrifice who we are: both as in giving up who we were, and as in taking who we were before and making ourselves more sacred. Let us accept this challenge during this Lenten season.