

Turn Around and Believe

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Jn 9:1-41

1 Sam 16:1-13

After 3 years of Seminary, many years in ministry and many more trying my best to live a good Christian life, I think I have finally, possibly, figured out what my Practice of Ministry professor meant when he concluded every class with “Turn around and Believe”.

Both of our readings from Scripture today tell us something about vision. I will focus my comments on the Gospel reading but you will see how the other fits in so nicely.

Our reading from John’s Gospel tells us of a time when Jesus and his disciples were taking a walk—a common Sabbath practice since work was forbidden on the holy day. They pass a man whom we are told was “born blind”. I imagine that he was begging on the side of the road as he had no other way of making a living. I also imagine that some of Jesus’ friends had known him since childhood. How else would they have known he was ‘born” that way? It seems like they are going to walk right past him when one of the friends asks Jesus, “whose sin caused him to be born blind. His own or his parents?” While we understand that the Ancients’ knowledge of medicine and health was very limited and often linked to superstition and even to religion, we shouldn’t scoff at this question!

How many times have you seen someone struggling to catch their breath, carrying a portable oxygen tank, and at least thought to yourself “well, he was a smoker.” Or heard of someone’s illness and thought or even commented “if she had only taken better care of herself”.? People say these things a lot, so they must think them even more. We haven’t come far from the Ancients! We don’t remember that a person in their 80’s today started smoking before it was widely known that it was hazardous to human health. Even today’s youth, told and shown again and again about the dangers of tobacco are often not strong enough to withstand the marketing strategies that have made teen vaping an epidemic! Whose sin is this-- Their own? Their parents’, the tobacco industry? The government who under lobbying pressure refuses to stop the tobacco industry from targeting teens?

When we see someone that we judge as not living a healthy lifestyle, do we look beyond what we see to the stressors underlying and causing what we see? To unmet emotional needs, the hurts not healed, the fears not confronted? Whose blame is this? Their own? Their parents? A spouse? The entire community that has not connected to this person?

No, we haven’t come far from where the Ancients were when we ask, “whose sin caused this illness or disability?”

But Jesus’ answer leaps light years ahead of this reasoning. He tells his friends that the man’s disability is not caused by sin but it is so that God can be glorified through it! What if we said that same thing when we saw someone who was ill or disabled?

Jesus calls the man over, makes some mud and puts it on the man’s eyes. Mud was often used by the Ancients in palliative care as both a protective wound covering and even for having medicinal properties of its own. In this instance, the mud covers the disability. The man obeys Jesus when he goes to wash it off in the pool to which he was directed. I’m supposing here that the man had some friends of his own,

or maybe some of Jesus' friends led him to that pool, he was sightless after all. And of course, the man returns to Jesus able to see.

I wonder how that must have felt to have gone from sightless to see the entire world, the faces of friends, the beauty of the countryside? How did he even recognize the one who had put the mud on his eyes and told him to go and wash it off? I can't even imagine going from never seeing at all to total vision in an instant!

The vision restored in this story is more than just the sight of a man born blind. The gift of vision is, more importantly, the spiritual vision of recognizing the glory of God. And the gift of understanding the un-God like rules of the Synagogue leaders, isn't it? Instead of rejoicing with the man over his gift of sight, they throw him out of the Synagogue for allowing someone to wash his eyes—to work on the Sabbath, and thus align his gift of sight with sin! And they threaten to throw his parents out too! For what? As they say, "he is a grown man, he can speak for himself." In fear, his parents chose not to rejoice with their son, but rather to stay blind to the glory of God in their midst! Good going religious leaders, You keepers of the faith!

Well, that's where we part ways with the Ancients! Or maybe not!

Throughout my life there have been times when my faith has been tested, seriously tested! Unlike some people, I never doubted that God exists, that God is present in the world, that God loves the world and the people of the World. For me, I have doubted at times, that God's love extended to me. These times of doubt most often come when my life is very difficult. I've seen God at work all around me but not in and for me. Perhaps the man born blind felt that way too!

Unfortunately, for me, these times had great fuel. In Seminary I had to take a Semester long course in the theology of John Calvin. His 3 volume Institutes of the Christian Religion still sits on my bookshelf in my Study at home and have been perused way to often! I look at my life, and instead of seeing my commitment to Christian living, I see all of the markings of one Calvin described as elect from before birth as destined for hell, for eternal separation from God. Pretty bleak yes?! Calvin believed that before birth just randomly, God chose or elected some people for eternal glory-union with God, or eternal damnation—separation from God. And that God did this just because God could and to show that God had the power to do it. Now, I don't really believe this! But there have been times when I looked at my life as a failure, the signs of success outlined by Calvin were no where in sight, and I was sorely tempted to ponder the possibility that Calvin was right.

There have been times in my life when I accepted difficult Calls to Ministry that no one else would take. Calls to lonely ministries, sometimes in a risky environment with little to no creature comforts. Times when my ministry was going well but I was lonely, or times like the last year or so when I was dealing with illness and physical pain and I said, "I'm doing everything I hear you ask of me Lord, why can't you let me feel your presence? Why am I not included in your gift of love?" This is a tough place for a Christian to be in and a very hard thing for me to admit to you. But the answer is coming. Turn around and believe! I'm still turning.

A couple of weeks ago I had surgery on my knee. I had to spend a night in the hospital. It was the nicest, cleanest hospital I have ever been in! and I have been in many, many hospitals both as patient and as visitor!

But across the aisle from me was just one other patient. Kim constantly rang her call button, all day and it seemed it would go on all night. As soon as one nurse or aid left she'd ring again. If they didn't come fast

enough, she'd ring the panic button and people would come running from everywhere." I dropped my tissue box. I can't read, I left my glasses at home (they bought her several pairs of cheaters from the gift shop free of charge), the TV isn't angled right, I spilled water and someone might slip, I can't reach my cup, and on and on" Everyone who came was so pleasant to her even on their fifth trip in. It was getting late at night and I wanted to sleep. So I called out to her. "Kim, its Betsy across the hall. You seem lonely and maybe a little scared. Would you like to talk?" So our late night conversation began.

Here is where you all enter the story! Kim asked if I had a large family. I had had visitors and calls and texts all day. I told her actually I don't have any close family except my daughter who was in school today. But I have a huge Church family and all of my visits and calls and texts came from them. I started to talk to her about our Church. And as I've been told I have a knack for verbally describing people so that they come to life—I told her about a few of the characters here—no names or identifying characteristics of course. I wanted her to see what real Christians were like. I also read some of my favorite Scripture passages to her ones that speak of God's never ending love, of God's plans for good, and of course our Acts passage that describes life within the community of believers! And I gave her the Bible to keep—I did have to hit the call button to assist with that! I encouraged her to find a Church to attend. She doesn't live near here and I never said where I attended Church, but I knew a few in her town and suggested when she was well, she go for a few weeks to each and pick one that was most comfortable to her. I told her that Church only becomes family when you have the attitude of going to give more than you get. I spoke of the activities she could get involved in and how she could serve others while getting to know them. After a while, we both were able to sleep.

The conversation we shared that night was God teaching me. I realized this more and more over the next few weeks. This Church family overwhelmed me with calls, cards, visits, flowers, incredible-nourishing food, rides for me and for Ali. God said, "Turn around and recognize me. I am here in them and they are in me and you are in me as I am in you. How much more present could I be in your life?" It reminds me of that footprint poem—God was carrying me, except you don't see one set of footprints in the sand, you see many—all of your footprints! My heart just overflows when I think of the love you all have poured out on me! No blame. No more wondering why I had to get injured and then get a painful disease on top of it when I'm working a stressful job and raising a teenager on my own. No not on my own, within this loving Community of Believers! My need for knee surgery allowed God's glory to be revealed to me and to God, and to Kim and to all of you!

No matter how hard we try to live a Christian life, we can't do it unless we are in community. Don't listen when friends tell you they are Christian but don't go to Church. Being Christin means living within a Community of Believers and taking that life out into the world! Its not just believing in God, its living God! The times when I most felt abandoned by God were the times when I was not a part of a strong community of believers. I look back now to my years as Pastor to the Homeless in NYC, a position funded by the World Council of Churches with no home base except a nursing home where I also served as chaplain. The work was great and I miss it so much. But the loneliness was bone deep. Now I'm thinking, why didn't I find a nearby church to join? I made my own hours so I could have easily belonged to a faith community. We live and we learn. Hopefully you, faster than I seem to learn!

In I Samuel, we hear the story of how God pointed out to Samuel his choice for Israel's next king. One by one he went down the line of 7 brothers each handsome and strong. One by one God said no. God's favor rested upon David the youngest, still a boy, with the lowliest job of shepherd. In Ancient times, a brother was never exalted over another, older brother. Birth order was very important and privileged. God doesn't choose us based on outward appearances. John Calvin had it all wrong. God sees our heart.

God sees when we choose God and God removes our blindness little by little so we can more fully recognize God's glory amongst us. We need to turn around from our Ancient beliefs, our judging others from the outside, judging ourselves from the way the world sees us, judging God by the way we want God to present divine presence to us. We need to let our eyes be washed and turn around and recognize the glory of God being shown to us through one another.

Skipping to the end of today's Gospel reading, Jesus doesn't just heal the man and walk away. Jesus recognizes that the man needs so much more than physical vision. He learns that the man was kicked out of the Synagogue—his community of faith, because he participated in healing work on the Sabbath. Jesus goes back to find the man and healed the man's Spiritual vision as well. Jesus asked him if he believed in him and the man worshipped him. I believe that the man stayed and joined the disciples, became a part of Jesus' band of special friends, and enjoyed life among the believers.

Like the man born blind, let the glory of God be revealed through you. Do not look to your outward appearance. Do not judge yourself against one another. God sees in your heart. God doesn't care if you are a doctor or lawyer or make a big paycheck or live in a big house. If you struggle to get by each month, and are using your gifts to display the glory of God—God will provide for you and then some. If you are making a big paycheck God sees in your heart—how are you spending it? All for you and yours or some for the glory of God? God sees with heavenly vision, not worldly vision. Calvin mistakenly thought God had the same vision that people have. The Protestant work ethic comes from Calvin. If the world saw you were prosperous it was because God had elected you for eternal glory. If the world saw you were poor and not having worldly success then it was a sign that you had been chosen for eternal damnation. So instead of accepting God's choice, people worked really hard and displayed the riches of their labor. Kind of backward thinking from a Christian!

God made you and gave you all the gifts and also the weaknesses God wanted you to have, and God looked upon you and continues to look upon you and proclaim, this one is GOOD!

Rejoice in God's fine workmanship. Give thanks, give praise, meet God in his Holy Word, and in daily prayer and believe that God loves you and is present with you. Then come to church and love your family here that God gave you as a gift. Bless one another with acts of loving care, as you have blessed me. For it is in the life of the local Church that God makes Divine presence known and felt. And then from here we, who recognize God's glory in our midst, can take it out to others. Don't ever waste an opportunity to share how wonderful it is to belong to a church family. With all of the crazy busyness in people's lives today, so many still feel unconnected and alone. Like I had, they don't feel God's presence in their lives. Penciling in a few church activities into their weekly calendars seems like it will tip them over the brink. Remind them, Church is the source of the living water, Church is the family that carries you through the hard times, life among the believers is so much less stressful than life on your own. Carry a bulletin with you. I have shared it at soccer games, in the deli counter and in the hospital.

Rejoice! God so loved you that he brought you here to FCCB to enjoy the richness of life among the believers and to recognize God's glory more and more. Turn around and look around at your family and Believe!

Amen