

“Jesus a Sinner?!?”

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 16, 2014

New Testament Lesson: Psalm 146

Old Testament lesson: John 9:13-16, 29-41

In Reynolds Price's story "The Foreseeable Future," a man named Whit Wade returns from World War II severely wounded. A spiritual healer named Juanita asks him, "Did your brain get damaged, or any of your backbone?" Whit said, "Not actual physical damage. What hurts is my soul." "That WILL give you fits," she said. Are you saved?" He answered, "Pretty surely. I'd rather drink lye than talk about it, but I accepted Christ when I was 13." "And you know he loves you?" Whit said, "I do" – his eyes were still shut. And he braced for an oncoming missionary spiel. If it came, he would thank her and fight his way out through whatever trouble [Juanita's] dogs threw at him. But Juanita kept up a long, breathing silence. Then, with a first little yip in her voice as if she might have waked herself up, she said, "Whitley Wade, you are now alive. Any day you'll realize that you have been healed."¹ Juanita was encouraging Whitley to open his eyes and to see and embrace the salvation he received when first accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

And in Our New Testament lesson today, we see Jesus opening the eyes of a blind man who then goes on to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. But the man born blind is not the only blind person in today's New Testament lesson. The Pharisees are blind, too, when it comes to Jesus. They say, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." But others say, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And John tells us that they were divided.

Divided over who is a sinner and who is not. Sound familiar? Throughout church history, we have been divided over everything from the true nature of Jesus as fully human and fully God, denial of the Trinity, and rejection of our need for God's grace in response to original sin, as if salvation were possible through our own efforts, divided over everything from these core beliefs to the more recent and less central disagreements about African Americans worshiping in what were then known as white churches; the ordination of women as pastors, priests, and bishops; whether an individual church should be permitted to ordain a gay or lesbian person as their pastor or as an elder, and whether a church ought to have the freedom to decide whether to perform same-sex marriages or not to permit them.

¹ Reynolds Price, *The Foreseeable Future* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 84.

When it comes to ordaining women, the Presbyterian Church in America broke from what is now our own PC(USA) during the 1970s largely over this issue, basing their argument on scripture. To this day, the PCA and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church still do not ordain women.

My point here is not to debate these issues, but rather to look at our scripture passage for today, and for search of clues as to what Jesus taught when it came to the divisions in the church based on our understanding of sin.

In today's lesson, the Pharisees seek to uphold the sanctity of the Sabbath, noting that Jesus healing on the Sabbath was a sin according to Scripture. When they see the blind man who Jesus healed, they say, "We know that God has spoken to Moses (who represents the Old Testament teachings about sin), "but as for this man (Jesus), we do not know where he comes from." They're calling Jesus a sinner.

So the man who was healed answers, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ... If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." And faced with that plain-spoken, heart-felt, gospel-grounded point of view, the Pharisees turn on the man who Jesus just healed and welcomed into the faith. "You were born entirely in (sin)," they say, "and are you trying to teach us?" And with that, they drove him out.

To give us an idea of what this might look like for someone, listen to this excerpt from Sarah Sentilles' book "A Church of Her Own: What Happens When a Woman Takes the Pulpit." In her book, Sentilles tells of her own experience being driven out of seminary during her call toward ordination. "To be ordained, I had to survive the ordination process," she says. "This proved impossible, and when it all fell apart – the process, my faith, my understanding of God – I figured I had been deluded to think being a priest is what I was meant to be, crazy to have dared to believe I might belong. I thought it was about me – that my theology was not traditional enough, my Christology not orthodox enough, my politics not conservative enough. I felt very alone. I started getting migraines.

The way I was treated during the ordination process confirmed my worst beliefs about myself: It's true, Sarah, you do not belong. You are not good enough. You have done something wrong. Ashamed, I withdrew from the process and stopped going to church altogether. Mine was a conversion in reverse." "Then," says Sarah, "I began to pay attention to the experiences of other women from my divinity school, and I realized that the brightest, most creative women I knew were also having trouble. Either they struggled through the ordination process in mainline Protestant denomination like I did, or once ordained and working in churches, they were silenced, humiliated, and abused.

These women – women who were brilliant and capable and loved Jesus, who were faithful, who brought down the house when they preached, who had dedicated their lives to serving God – were being driven out of churches or were leaving the ministry altogether. Many were depressed. Some were angry. Most were ashamed. What was happening?” asks Sentilles. Her answer? “All of their experiences revealed the failure of churches to celebrate and support women in ministry and betrayed a deep misogyny (a deep gender bias and prejudice) alive and well in most Christian denominations.” This was published in 2008, and I knew women who had these experiences when I was in Seminary, as well. Reflecting on the experience of women such as Sarah, one wonders if we were to look back through the teachings of Jesus, would we likewise discover that the church back then was also failing to celebrate and support certain people because of who they were, and thus betraying a deep prejudice that has been alive and well dating back to our earliest religious communities? Perhaps we would, most assuredly we would.

But again, my goal is not to debate prejudice, but to seek out and follow Christ-based wisdom in response to it. John tells us that Jesus heard that the Pharisees had driven out the man cured of blindness, the man who Jesus welcomed into the faith, and hearing of their prejudice, Jesus declared, “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” “Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ “Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.” Turns out that where Jesus sees the biggest sin is in our ***prejudice against others***, our judgments and discrimination about who they are in the eyes of God.

While the Pharisees drive out the man Jesus healed, Jesus welcomes this man as a valuable and full member of society, and this parallels Jesus’ words in Chapter 6, verse 37 of John, where Jesus says, “Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.” And yet still, we sit in judgment of others. Even though Jesus clearly says that it is he who came into the world for judgment, we go around judging and rejecting each other. We do this because, obviously, we can see what’s right and what’s wrong. We’ve read the scriptures and we know exactly what God accepts and what God rejects. So why shouldn’t we be the ones to hold the line on behalf of God. If not us, who else is going to protect the integrity of the faith?

Well, let’s see. When the Pharisees came to Jesus making this very same argument – when they said we know the law and surely we are not blind to all of this – Jesus said to them, “If you were blind” – if you were open to the fact that there are some things you just don’t see – “you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see’” – now that you say we know what’s what without a shadow of a doubt and so we can be the ones to judge others, well then, says Jesus, “your sin remains.”

That's what Jesus says. What do you say? In light of that teaching, what do you think about our role in judging others? Perhaps God would be better served if we focused ourselves on leading people to Christ and then letting Christ work in their lives to bring them ever closer to God.

I mean that's our hope for ourselves, isn't it? Knowing that we are not perfect and that we are not even able to clearly choose between right and wrong in our own lives, don't we hope for ourselves that Christ would work in us to bring us ever closer to God? And if that's our hope for ourselves, shouldn't that be our hope for others, apart from judging them – just sharing with them the love of God through our Lord Jesus Christ and then leaving sin and salvation – not in our hands – but in the hands of Christ?

I mean, really, isn't that why God sent Jesus into the world in the first place? Isn't that why Jesus went to the cross at the hands of judgmental and misguided society? A society that, sadly, we are a part of; a society that God is working everyday, to redeem through our most faithful actions and through our most prayerful decisions? Isn't it best if the question of sin and salvation, for anybody, is left in the hands of Jesus?

Pastoral Prayer

Holy God, hear our prayers. We take great comfort in knowing that you see each one of us and know our deepest needs, and yet you have told us to come to you in prayer, and so we do so in humility and faith.

God, some of us are sick – we ask for you to heal us.

Some of us are without work – we ask that you would provide.

Some of us can no longer see through our tears – heal our hearts.

We are so grateful for the many beautiful blessings you have given us. We have not forgotten them.

But we know that you are not unfamiliar with our sorrows, so we give them to you now. Take them and bring beauty from ashes as only you can.

For it was you, O God, who brought light from darkness. Help us to see your light so well that it not only illumines our path but reflects off us to illumine others.

We pray this prayer in the name of the One who was called the Light of the World, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to say when we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us
from evil.**

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.