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John 9.1-41

“Holding Steady Under the Cross”

Have you noticed that a disproportionate amount of television drama takes place in courtrooms? There is something about the courtroom that makes it the perfect stage, evidently, for playing out the dramas of work, life, and love. Often, I have noticed, it is the place where a show’s creators can grind an axe or two—where moral viewpoints are taken and where their sheer superiority can be vividly displayed. Someone makes an impassioned plea that cuts through everyone’s misconceptions or prejudices, and the camera picks up pained expressions of “ok, you’re right, I have been too small-minded,” or delighted and relieved faces which communicate, “thank goodness, finally someone is paying attention to my rights and my needs.”

A lot of these dramatized courtroom soliloquies are shallow and obvious, I have to say. They are patched together from a series of platitudes, commonplaces, and even prejudices. They tell us nothing we don’t already know, and often they distort even that. And yet they have power. The courtroom scene *works* as TV drama—it keeps us tuned in and paying attention. Why is that, I wonder? Why do we succumb to the manipulative rhetoric of the TV lawyer?

I suspect it’s because life is full of ambiguity and perplexity. People don’t always get what they deserve. We live in a morally irrational universe where no good deed goes unpunished and so many evil deeds are rewarded. People are born blind or challenged in some other way that we would not wish for ourselves. People are born into cycles of poverty which they did not create while others have seemingly unlimited resources from the “get go.” Life in the twenty-first century in particular is complicated and hard to sort out. Globalization creates opportunity and threat. American power is both a blessing and a nemesis. Increased mobility expands our horizons and contracts our relationships. In the face of all this, we have a deep psychological need for moments of crystalline moral clarity, where the rich woodwork of courtrooms and churches keeps complexity safely away from us, and where the eloquent voice of truth can cut through all of our confusions and our delusions.

Another reason the courtroom scene is compelling is because of the particular kind of drama that gets played out there. It’s just interesting. One side calls a star witness, after deliberating long and hard whether that’s the right thing to do. Will he or she be able to hold steady under “the cross” (that is, the cross-examination). Will the opposing lawyer be able to find some weakness to exploit and thereby to turn the witness against us? Is it worth the risk?

I recall many television courtroom dramas when I read our gospel text for the day. It is very definitely a courtroom scene. Jesus has healed a man who has been born blind. Here the mystery of evil is confronted and overcome, purely and simply, but there evidently must be a trial of sorts to figure out if the healing was legitimate or not. The Pharisees are well-equipped to prosecute the case. They are experts in the law, and part of their professed vocation is applying it and weighing the merits of particular cases as well as claims to authority or religious expertise. They are equivalent, in many ways, to both attorneys and judges in our legal system.

And so, well armed with legal authority, they go to work. First, they reason, this healing, if indeed there was actually a healing (which they contest) could not have come from God, because it is the Sabbath. Now, God, as Moses taught us, is at rest on the Sabbath, and cannot be bothered. Therefore, this alleged healing is not God’s work—and therefore, Jesus is a sinner, because that means that *he* has been doing work on the Sabbath day and thus violating the Law. It is a brilliant and learned argument. Either there was no healing, and Jesus is a fraud, or there was one, in which case Jesus was doing work on the Sabbath day, and is therefore a sinner.

You could say that this man who had been born blind was Jesus' star witness to his ministry of healing and redemption—but would he be able to hold steady under such a formidable “cross?”

But this where this gospel drama is more surprising and far more remarkable than television's courtroom (melo)dramas. Rather than grandstanding with a series of eloquently stated platitudes and commonplaces (the man born blind could hardly have been an educated man, after all), he simply states the facts as he has experienced them. What drives this drama, in fact, are not lofty moral truths and their power to persuade, but the radical implications of the obvious facts at hand. Redemption has occurred. God has acted. A man has been healed. And it has had nothing to do with Law or with Pharisaic wisdom or with learned efforts to interpret, contain, or manipulate God's revealed will. “All I know,” the man said, “is that once I was blind, and now I can see.”

“Deal with that,” we can almost hear him say. In fact, he does turn the tables, asking them whether they ought not acknowledge and grapple with what has happened here. Maybe they haven't got it right about Jesus. Maybe, then, they haven't got it right about *God*. “Are *you* now trying to teach *us*?” is how the Pharisees angrily respond.

But that is just what has happened, isn't it? The unlearned has “schooled” the learned. The one who knows nothing save what he has experienced puts the question to the ones who think they know everything and in truth have experienced so very little. Those who have favored law over grace have gotten it wrong. Those who have privileged order over redemption have missed the mark. Those whose intellects have been carefully trained to find fault and to assign blame have found themselves unable to see what is right in front of them.

The question, then, is just who needs to have their eyes opened? What does it mean to be blind, and what does it mean to see? According to Jesus, these experts have blinded themselves by their very unwillingness to see that they cannot see. In other words, their confidence in thinking that know what God will do and what God will not do is the very thing that makes them incapable of recognizing God when he is right there in front of them.

I wonder, do we need to have our eyes opened? Truthfully, though we Presbyterians are a comparatively learned bunch, I'm guessing that we are not as a group overconfident that we know everything there is to know about God. But still, do we box God in by our expectations? Or, better, do we *expect* God to be boxed in by our expectations?

We live in an age of “news” of all sorts: local news, sports news, news about national politics, even religious news. I believe “news” may be our new “Law.” We are not experts on biblical tradition anymore, most of us, but we are all experts on what to expect. The news does that to us. It promulgates “conventional wisdom” with an efficiency never seen before. Our expectations get shaped according to what the news reports, and we box out all kinds of possibilities because they do not fit with the pattern and flow of the barrage of reporting.

Like law, news is good. We benefit from news. News helps us orient ourselves, feel a part of what is going on in the world. But I wonder if we don't have to work extra hard in our day not to be imprisoned by news. Its very availability and even ubiquity may be blinding us to the unexpected. The reports of corruption and self-serving may be closing our eyes to the plain realities of trust and sacrifice that happen every day. Accounts of disaster broadcast from helicopters may mute the voices of compassion and courage which are heard at ground level. The law of the news is that bad things happen, that this is a world of disease, and so the voice that cries out “I've been healed” isn't so much disputed as it is not heard at all.

What I think we need most badly in our world today are the eyes to see the power of God's grace. Why not close each day with a brief but vital meditation: asking yourself, “Where have I seen God's grace at work today?” What surprising memories will you awaken? What subtle but unmistakable rays of hope will you discern? In what ways might you be called to increase your own love of God and neighbor? Beside restoring

sight, Jesus also preached a message about you will see when your eyes are opened: “The kingdom of God,” he said, “is among you.” Do you see it? Amen.