

Lightbearing in Lent

John 9:1-41

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A few years ago when I traveled to the Sudan and we came back to our retreat center from a church we visited in the desert, it was already very dark. Now, when you hear the words “retreat center” you may picture in your mind’s eye a different setting than it actually was. The retreat center had no water or electricity, but it was a safe place to be. On that particular night, I recall the six of us had our dinner by use of a flashlight. I had one of those LED headband flashlights that my friend had as well. Recalling that experience and the words of Jesus in verse 5, “I am the light of the world” made those words take on extra meaning for me. For as Christ is our only hope in a world that is tainted by sin, so too those flashlights were our only resource for finding our food on a pitch black night.

This morning Jesus’ encounter with a man born blind gives us a whole new perspective of how we should interpret the season of Lent. And how these weeks before Easter can go beyond a period of personal spiritual reflection and improvement to a time of evangelistic outreach and gospel sharing.

What I mean by that is the following. For many people Lent is a season that is mostly personal, what will I give up for Lent? I will go to a few extra church services. I will engage in Lenten devotional reading. Now all of these activities are good and a positive use of time. However, it seems to me that when you look at this event in Jesus’ life just prior to the first Easter, Jesus was not preoccupied with self, but with the needs of others. And perhaps this challenges and enhances our Lenten perspective as well.

The text informs us that as he walked along, “he saw a man born blind from birth.” The disciples, rather than seeing an obvious need and a chance to enhance the

message of the gospel, began to play detective and solve the riddle of why he was blind. Jesus simply intervened and healed the man.

You see, the whole theme of this section of scripture is that Jesus saw the building of the kingdom, that is, making believers, as his number one priority. He could have become involved in a long conversation with his disciples about blindness, but he chose not to. He could have become self-absorbed with the cross that awaited him, but he engaged in ministry instead. The point that Jesus was making was that as recipients of the gospel our important task is also to make disciples.

Note if you will the obstacles to the gospel contained in this passage. They say a lot about why evangelism is stymied when we lack a willingness to put our faith squarely in Christ or see the hand of God at work. We already mentioned the disciples. They were stuck on the reason for the man's blindness; Jesus wanted them to see how the man's blindness was going to enable them to witness the power of God, and they wanted to discuss theology.

Then the neighbors, they were reluctant to identify him as the man they had seen. Undoubtedly they were caught up in the miracle that now he had sight, but instead of going to Jesus or declaring the good news of what happened they became shy and timid - we better check with the experts, the Pharisees in other words, we better buckle under.

Let me ask, does that ever happen to you? You hear about or witness something spiritually uplifting and your first inclination is to share it, but then you hesitate. I can't share that at work, I could get fired for being overtly religious. I can't say that in a classroom because I could lose my job. At some point we are all confronted with the same question, who do we answer to, God or humanity?

I'm convinced that the church I love, our Presbyterian Church suffers from this same malady. Each year, as a denomination, we continue to experience membership

loss. Perhaps like the neighbors in today's passage we've too often caved into the polls of public opinion. We don't want to appear offensive or too forward. Sometimes the contemporary mainline Protestant Church reminds me of a ship at sea. We're sailing along and as we look over the railing we see people drowning in the sea of unbelief, and rather than immediately giving them a lifesaver or floatation device or sending out the life rafts we're asking, can you swim? Can you tread water? Hey, there's a swimming course at the local YMCA! Yet, Jesus on the other hand is the light of the world and calls on us to be lightbearers.

A third group in this scenario, that missed the message of the miracle and the true identity of Jesus, were the Pharisees. As Jesus alluded to at the end of the passage in verse 41, they suffered from another form of blindness. Now the Pharisees avoided dealing with the Lordship of Christ through their piety and preoccupation with legalism. Rather than exploring the uniqueness of Christ and his healing power they preferred instead to challenge him about healing on the Sabbath. And then they challenged that the man was ever blind in the first place. So the Pharisees concluded that Jesus was a sinner and could not be acting in the power of God.

Do you know that there are still 21st century Pharisees? There are plenty of people today who don't want to take seriously the claims of Christ. They hide behind their contrived walls of piety and protection. Why should I follow Christ? You Christians are by no means perfect. Why should I be at church on Sunday? I work hard all week long, I deserve a time of rest. If Jesus were so powerful and really hears prayers why then do bad things happen to good people? Why should I be concerned about where I'll spend eternity? I'm living in the now. And the list goes on.

None of that takes away our role as lightbearers to the truth of the gospel. And so I want to encourage you to speak up on behalf of Christ. You know, only one person claimed Christ as Savior that day and that was the man born blind. And Jesus, you'll

note, persisted with him until he experienced faith. He thinks no less of us and expects no less of us in terms of declaring our faith.

If you've had the experience of leading someone else to faith in Christ you know there is nothing that rivals that opportunity. As Paul declares in Galatians 6:9, "Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we can reap a harvest if we do not lose heart."

The final set of people in this scenario are the parents. That's who the Pharisees turned to in order to get the goods on Jesus. These leaders are incredulous and the parents fear them because they know of a conspiracy that will expel anyone from the Synagogue who stands with Jesus. They deflect the Pharisees' question and direct them back to their son.

The Parents' shell game with the Pharisees is another important reminder from this passage, that following Jesus costs us something. We cannot play hide and seek with God. And when others witness us doing that our role as lightbearers is diminished. Instead of his parents affirming Christ's healing of their son, they were more concerned about their standing at the Synagogue.

So what does all of this say about words of encouragement from Jesus to be lightbearers? Know that the work of Christ always brings varied responses. In the presence of the amazing truth that the tomb was empty, some individuals will continue to resist Christ's grace. It is neither our responsibility to judge, nor is it our responsibility to make other's decisions. What is clear from this passage is that we are to bear witness to our Savior and his plan of redemption. "This little light of mine I'm gonna let it shine."