



March 2, 2008

Focus scripture
John 9:1–41

Additional scriptures
1 Samuel 16:1–13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8–14

Gracious God, we encounter and follow you in ways long practiced before us. So keep us open and alive to meeting and following you in ways unexpected and untravelled. Keep us open to the ones we might otherwise overlook. Keep us open to love. Amen.

No Limits on Love

Rules and traditions intend to set helpful limits. Yet even the best-intentioned may be narrowly viewed so as to lose sight of what is needed: love. God sees and works beyond constricted perspectives so that opportunities to restore and anoint are not lost. Do we see and act that way? Or does fear of breaking with the old – or being open to the new – blind us?

Focus Scripture: John 9:1–41

Blindness and other ailments were often viewed in ancient times as punishment for sin. The disciples of Jesus and the leaders who oppose him assume this. Biblical scholar Richard Rohrbaugh speaks of an ancient custom of spitting in the presence of the blind in order to protect oneself from the “evil eye.” Jesus transforms that act of disdain into one of healing.

Sabbath keeping was the most visible mark of practicing Judaism. Its weekly ritual of renewal reflected – even as it worshipped – the God who “rested” (translating the Hebrew *shabath*) on the seventh day of creation (Genesis 2:2). In this story, Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath creates the initial controversy (verse 16). At issue is what can or cannot be done on Sabbath. Many oral traditions had developed to provide guidance. “Kneading” was technically forbidden. Jesus’ making of mud (verse 6) could be viewed as such activity. The larger question involves Sabbath and healing. Has Jesus broken or kept the law by performing this act?

The healing creates division within the community. Neighbours divide over whether this is the same man they had known (verse 9). Pharisees divide over whether Jesus is from God or not (verse 16). The man’s parents distance themselves from their son for fear of the religious leaders (verses 21–22). The divisions within the narrative hint at divisions between church and synagogue in the author’s time. Verse 22’s threat of expulsion from the synagogue can be heard as reflecting that later state of affairs.

The transformation of the one who is healed is not just from blindness to sight. Initially, he is a passive recipient of Jesus’ actions. The healed one becomes more active as the story goes on. By reporting

what has happened, he becomes a teacher of theology to the teachers of theology. Eventually this healed one becomes a disciple of the one who healed.

The story begins with Jesus *seeing* this man. From that seeing comes healing. Later Jesus *finds* this man, and from that finding comes belief. The story does not end there. Jesus and the religious leaders speak. On the surface, Jesus’ words levy judgment. The leaders’ presumption of seeing is interpreted as indication of sin (verse 41). But is that not where the text began? Did Jesus not heal and restore sight to one presumed to be a sinner? The text leaves it open as to whether these leaders, and the rest of us, may yet find healing.

God’s sight and oversight are central in the other texts. **1 Samuel 16:1–13** affirms that God sees beyond the superficial and into the heart. **Psalm 23** witnesses the psalmist’s reliance upon the watchful care of the shepherd. **Ephesians 5:8–14** uses the language of light and darkness to speak of coming in Christ to faith and new life.

Out of God’s seeing comes God’s providing. In 1 Samuel 16, God provides a new leader for Israel. The psalmist declares that God’s presence assures life even in the face of danger. The writer of Ephesians 5 celebrates the change God in Christ brings us.



God is in the business of seeing what others overlook and restoring life that has been overlooked. Who are the ones “overlooked” today that remind us of the blind man’s situation and potential? In what ways might love be calling you and your congregation to revisit and perhaps reinterpret some of your established ways of doing things, in order that God’s love might prevail?

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