

At First Sight

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A sermon preached by
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Text:
John 9:1-41

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John 9:1-41

As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.” ¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he

sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” ²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” ³⁸He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

³⁹Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” ⁴¹Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.



God was sitting in heaven when a scientist prayed. "God, we don't need you anymore. Science has finally figured out a way to create life out of nothing – in other words, we can now do what you did in the beginning."

"Oh, is that so? Tell me." replied God.

"Well," says the scientist, "we can take dirt and form it into the likeness of you and breathe life into it, thus creating humans."

"Well, that's very interesting... show me."

So the scientist bends down to the earth and starts to mold the soil into the shape of a human being.

"No, no, no ... not so fast," interrupts God, "Get your own dirt."

In John's Gospel, just before today's reading from Chapter 9, Jesus is challenged by the religious leaders who brought to him a woman caught in the act of adultery. "Teacher," they say, "this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground." (John 8: 4-8)

I love both these stories.

In John 8, Jesus draws something in the dirt. We have no idea what it is, what he decides is worth sketching out in front of his students and these religious elite. He stoops and draws twice, in

fact. Scholars today suggest that Jesus was probably illiterate – like most everyone of 1st Century Israel. Very few people could read and write – maybe the leaders who challenged Jesus could since they were the lawyers of the day, trained in the Torah, their primary place in society being to interpret the 613 laws that Judaism created from all that God commanded in those five books. But most peasants, like Jesus, were illiterate.

WWJD. What Would Jesus ... Draw? Would he draw an arrow pointing judgment at those who would judge this poor woman? Would he draw a box representing how these lawyers want to limit God by boxing God into some set of some narrow boundaries? Would he draw two people holding hands trying to be reconciled to one another? Would he draw scales of justice weighing the severity of the punishment against the sinful act? What would Jesus draw?

In Chapter 9 of John's Gospel Jesus spits. Spits in the dirt at the feet of the man born blind, at the feet of the religious snobs who choose to wag their fingers in the faces of those who are simply trying to eke out an existence as poor dirt farmers, at the feet of those who stood around waiting for an opportunity to attach their future to someone who knew what he was talking about who could lead them to a better life.

Jesus spits in the dirt. I love that image. This text is so earthy (no pun intended), so sensory that we can almost feel the mud placed on this man's eyes, feel the warm breath of Jesus as he pulls the man in close to speak words of healing, taste the sweat pouring from our brows as our beliefs about sin and righteousness are called to task. It's a sensory experience extraordinaire.

And it takes us back to the second of the two creation stories we in Genesis. "[T]he Lord God formed [humanity] from the dust of the ground, and breathed into [its] nostrils the breath of life; and [humanity] became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the [human] whom

[God] had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ” (Genesis 2:7-10)

James Weldon Johnson in a beautiful piece of poetry emphasizes the grounded-ness of this part of the creation story. After God had finished creating everything else, writes Weldon:

Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that He had made.
He looked on His world
With all its living things
And God said: I'm lonely still.
Then God sat down--
On the side of a hill where He could think;
By a deep, wide river He sat down;
With His head in His hands,
God thought and thought,
Till He thought:
I'll make me a man!
Up from the bed of the river God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand,
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image;
Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.

When I read this story in John's Gospel about the encounter Jesus has with the man who was born blind and the Pharisees and the man's parents and the crowds gathered around to hear and see what's going on – it's just a beautiful scene that is right at the core of why Jesus was here and why we have remained followers of this 1st Century Jewish sage. And the story bends right down to the very essence of our existence – bends down to the dirt.

There is something healing about the dirt under our feet – the stuff of life from which we are formed. I drove by yesterday morning and saw the sweatshirt-hooded figure of Ron Brunner digging out the stump of a tree which needed to be removed. I've seen Joyce Cobb planting flowers in the planter under our sign out front and near the office entrance. Gloria Downs has planted tulips in the pots at our Sanctuary front door. Each year we have worshipped in the beauty of the garden where Cindy Popow has turned the dirt over and over and over. Jackie Engler has put out a call for all of us to join her on April 30 to get our hands dirty as we plant around the church grounds. And even just last night in the middle of working at the computer and getting dinner ready, I took a minute to transfer a sorry little flower from a thin plastic holder into a noble clay pot and prayed for its resurrection.

The dirt around us is filled with God's presence and healing. The dirt beneath our feet is sacred – it's holy ground, just as the story of Moses engaging God at the burning bush reminds us when God says, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5) Every piece of God's creation is sacred ground.

On Thursday I stood in the mud of a freshly dug grave at Glenwood Cemetery with Frieda Wilson's family and friends as we heard the traditional words of remembering that continue to center me whenever I speak them or hear them – “we commit this body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life” – not

meant as a chilling or depressing reminder of our own mortality but rather as a fulfillment of promise and a remembering of the cycle of God's continuing creativity.

It is, in fact, where we started this Lenten journey through the wilderness. In the dirt and dust of Ash Wednesday. "From dust you have come, to dust you will return."

Do you recall a number of years ago Robert Fulghum's book of essays, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*," was popular? I don't know if he created the saying or just used it as the foundation for his writings, but it's pretty on point.

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at school.

These are the things I learned:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don't hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
- Wash your hands before you eat.
- Flush.
- Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
- Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- Take a nap every afternoon.
- When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in

the Styrofoam cup: the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

- Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.
- And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

With this simple movement of stopping and stooping, of scooping up dirt and mixing in the water and electrolytes, mucus, and enzymes of humanness, of placing his hands on the eyes of one who had the faith to understand the importance of this encounter, Jesus heals us all. In this one brief moment in our scripture Jesus offers some significant clues about God and us and whoever wrote John's Gospel gave us a nearly endless collection of lessons to live by:

- Our sins have no bearing on our abilities and our potentialities – we inherently know this but we have to keep reminding ourselves.
- Each of us sins when we distance ourselves from each other and from God – when we push ourselves away and refuse to touch and be touched.
- God works in and around all of us and God's works are revealed in each and every life that has ever been created.
- Some of us are born blind and see clearly while others are born with vision but simply choose to not see.
- At times we treat each other so badly that some of us have to beg for food or money or shelter or health care or even simple compassion.
- Our parents don't know everything about us. Children know very little about their parents.

- At times we get so hung up on the rules that we have created that we fail to see the glory that God has created.
- It's okay to play in the dirt.

At first sight this text is about restoring a blind man's vision. At second glance it's simply a dirty story. And it's this story that calls us to this table this morning. You and I, created from God's dirt, walk to this table along the sacred ground that God gave us and we gather at this table made from trees which grew from that very same dirt that God breathed life into. While here we eat bread kneaded from the offspring of seeds planted lovingly by human hands and we drink from this cup filled with juice squeezed from the fruit of the vine tended by people created in the same way we have been created.

Most likely Jesus used the traditional Hebrew blessings as he broke bread and drank with his friends. And at the root of these prayers is the sacredness of the dirt from which they grew. At our last Church Council meeting we were talking about what to do with old copies of the Bible from our church library and I said that's it's really okay to recycle them – it's not sacrilege. In fact, in Jewish tradition it is proper to bury old Torah scrolls or anything that contains the name of God – to return them to the earth from which they came.

The prayers which Jesus probably used to eat and drink with his friends:

Bread – *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz.* Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe who brings forth bread from the earth.

Wine – *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, borei p'ri hagafen.* Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, creator of the fruit of the vine.

At first sight this story is about an encounter between 1st Century Jewish sage with healing powers and a man born blind who begs for survival. But looker deeper and you find the dirt of the story – the roots reaching down into a world that would just as soon reject both of these people – the man born blind because he makes us face the fragility of life and Jesus because he dares to challenge us to live outside the norm, whatever that may be.

Dig deep into the dirt. Dig past that first sight of the surface. Dig deep and you find God.

Amen.

[The sermon ended with this a by Tom Atwood which can be heard at <http://www.macjams.com/song/8146>]

Jesus Spits
by Tom Atwood

Jesus spits, spits in the dust,
Spits on a Saturday. Jesus!
Jesus spits, spits in the dust
Spits on a Saturday. Jesus!

I once was lost
But now I'm found
Was blind but now I see

He takes his hands
Mixes up the mud
Puts it on the blind man's eyes
He takes his hands
Mixes up the mud
Puts it on the blind man's eyes.

(Chorus)

Just as long as I'm in this world
I'm the light of the world.
Just as long as I'm in this world
I am the light of the world.

Jesus told the blind man
'Wash your eyes'
Wash them in light of God. Jesus told the blind man
'Wash your eyes'
Wash them in the light of God.

I once was lost
But now I'm found
Was blind but now I see.

The blind man sees,
He sees the light
He was fixed by the love of God.
The blind man sees,
He sees the light,
He was fixed by the love of God
He was fixed by the love of God, etc

(Chorus)

The Pharisees came
Shook their heads
No healing on the Sabbath day!
The Pharisees came
Shook their heads
No healing on the Sabbath day!

'Was this man blind?
Who healed this man?
Who did this job?
Healing on the Sabbath day!'

No healing on the Sabbath
Healing on the Sabbath
Healing on the Sabbath day!

(Chorus)

Wash your eyes!
See the light!
Wash your eyes!
See the light!

We've been fixed by the love of God
We've been fixed by the love of God
We've been fixed by the love of God...