

John 9:1-41

In the Presence

I am going to start with a disclaimer. As long as that reading was, you have only heard part of the story of the man blind that Jesus healed. Somewhere, sometime, people decided that to help organize how to find things in the Bible they should give the readings chapter numbers, headings, and count the sentences and call them verses. That is helpful, but sometimes it also makes things more complicated. When reading a story, we like knowing we have beginning, middle and an end. I am sure that a number of my teachers from kindergarten on taught me that is how stories work. Yet today you have only heard the beginning and the start of the middle.

If you pay close enough attention to the reading you will see that the story starts with Jesus walking down the street and sees a man blind from birth. He gets into a conversation with the disciples who we are told ask him the wrong question as they ask about sin, which Jesus says has nothing to do with the man's condition, rather this is an opportunity to "Look instead for what God can do." (v3)

Things get pretty gross after that, as Jesus takes dirt, spits into it, makes a paste and wipes it on the man's eyes. Then he tells him to go wash in a particular body of water. Now remember, up until this point, the man has not seen Jesus, he was blind, so he has only heard Jesus' voice.

The man heads off to the Pool at Siloam. He washed and saw anything and everything for the first time. Now realize that Jesus is no longer in the picture for the next part of the story. This part is all about the community's reaction to the healing. As you can read, people are not impressed, especially those who believe they have most comprehensive and researched knowledge of how God works in the world. They don't want that threatened. They just react rather than being curious about what is going on. Sure, they ask questions, but the questions are accusatory, not inquisitive.

The parents don't defend their child either. They were too worried about repercussions and their standing with those who have power and authority. After much cross examination the man, who knew he was under threat gave them an answer they didn't want to hear. He witnessed to Jesus. He stood firm in his experience. Nothing could waver him from the fact that this man Jesus was the reason he could see. He openly wonders why they cannot "see" that for themselves. The religious authorities said, "You're nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!" Then they threw him out in the street." (v34)

Remember as all of this has happened, Jesus was not there to witness it. When Jesus heard that they had thrown the healed man out, Jesus went and found him.” Also remember, the man has never seen Jesus, he has only heard him speak. When Jesus asks him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (v35) the man’s response is “Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him.” (v36). And the next words from Jesus are where we need to land, “Jesus said, ‘You’re looking right at him. Don’t you recognize my voice?’” (v37)

Seeing and hearing together. First the man heard Jesus’ voice then he sees Jesus, which is why when we only read chapter nine of the Gospel of John, we miss that fact that Jesus did not stop his teaching at verse 41 of chapter 9. Jesus continues into what we call chapter 10 and we get the words that are familiar to so many of us, the words about Jesus the Good Shepherd and the gate keeper. And that the sheep knows Jesus’ voice. The people of God hear Jesus’ voice.

So as much as many a sermon has made this story of the man born blind a miracle story and all about sight, that only takes part of the story into account. The middle and the end are about Jesus the shepherd and there is as much emphasis put on hearing Jesus as seeing Jesus.

So as is usually my pondering, what has all this got to do with us today? Why is this story in its fullness something to pay attention to? Well, because it speaks to relationship and in particular our relationship with Jesus as well as others.

Think of people whose voices you know well, so well in fact that you do not need to see the person to know it is them just by their voice. I have that with my children and with Ken. Because they are such an intimate part of my life, I can tell it is them with the first hello. I smile as I say that, since with technology it is pretty easy to know who is calling as call display pretty much always gives us a heads up. Still there are those whose numbers are hidden from us, but we can still pin point exactly who we are speaking with because their voice is so familiar to us.

I have a girlfriend from college. We spent two years of our lives together. She was a bridesmaid at my wedding. We speak maybe twice a year and have only seen each other a handful of times in the last 40 years, but when I hear her voice, I know without a doubt that it is my long-time and wonderful friend.

After thinking about this, I had tears as I pondered what it would mean to hear my mom’s voice again. A voice I have not heard in nearly seven years. If I heard her, I would know without a doubt it was my mom, it would send me in the direction of her voice. And to actually see her...well my heart and mind would be overwhelmed by the amount of joy and love flowing from it.

Now you may not have had that kind of relationship with you mom, but think of someone that has so much meaning in your life that to see and hear them makes your heart glad. I am grateful to have many such relationships with family, friends, and people in this and

other churches. My heart is gladdened and lifted up, my spirit filled with joy and love. Many of those relationships also hold so much more promise for deepening and memories, of time together and life experiences together.

This is the promise that we have in Jesus. This is the kind of relationship Jesus, and through Jesus, God wants to have with us. It is a relationship that is so close that we know Jesus' voice when we hear it, even though we cannot see him. It is about knowing Jesus present to us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. So close to our hearts and minds that we know that somehow, some way Jesus is present with us.

We can't see Jesus, but we can see the face of Jesus in those we love and those we encounter. This hearing and seeing is about being in relationship with God, a God who loves us so much that the Son, Jesus, came to know life with us, died because that love ran so deep and wide and high and long that he chose to go to the extreme to take away anything that gets in the way of our relationship with God. That through the forgiveness of sin we could hear God's voice calling to us, teaching us, leading us, present with us.

We see God in the people and creation around us. All this is important and life-giving. Yet we are called to more. Think back on the relationships that were brought to mind when I asked you to consider someone whose voice or presence would bring you joy. If I asked you to share with me stories of that person, your experiences together, it is likely that the stories would pour out from you.

That is what we are moving toward in our relationship with Jesus, with God. A relationship that is so important, so life-giving, so filled with joy and promise that we can't help but share those stories with others. Not just because they are stories, but because we want to have others know that joy and promise for themselves.

Now I am not saying go out and preach to people, but don't be afraid either. Like the man blind from birth, share how now you see that there is a relationship to be had, that Jesus does make a difference. Maybe you do it through words, maybe through actions, maybe and most often both as part of your regular life, so normal to you that it is like your breath.

With the man from the scripture, whose story has been told over and over again from one generation to the next, may we respond to Jesus words, of seeing and hearing with "I believe."

You and I stand in the presence of Jesus. We do that as individuals and as a community of faith together. Let us share that love, grace, forgiveness, hope, joy, and life with all.