

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

March 19, 2023

Costly Sight

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is something incredibly tragic about the healing we just read about. I wonder if you noticed it...no one, absolutely no one, seems happy or excited for this man's healing. There's no rejoicing at his restoration. He has likely had an incredibly difficult life as a blind man in first century Palestine. His options for survival were very limited and he was likely very dependent on the kindness and charity of others simply to live. Then Jesus comes along and restores his sight, opening up far more options for him going forward. You would think **someone** would be happy for him.

Instead of a celebration though, this man faces interrogation and potential excommunication. All over being healed by Jesus. Why I wonder. What is so threatening about this man's healing that his neighbors cannot be happy for him? Or is it not about the man? Is it Jesus who is seen as the threat? And what threat exactly? The responses in this scene seem so utterly bizarre, and yet also very, very human.

I think, ultimately, the reason no one seems happy for this man is because they are no longer right about him. And we humans hate it when we're wrong. Once this man's sight was restored, he is no longer the blind man who "used to sit and beg."¹ He is no longer the man some could throw a few pennies at in order to feel better about themselves, or in order to earn status by giving alms publicly. For others he is no longer the man they could look down on and judge, wondering to themselves what the disciples say out loud, "what did he or his parents do that he deserved this?"

It sure seems like most of the people in this man's life were content to label him "blind beggar" and use his existence for their own purposes. As I preached on a few weeks ago, reducing someone to a label is the first step in dehumanizing them. This man has been reduced by his community to "blind

¹ John 9:8

beggar” and then largely written off. He is a **nothing** in the eyes of his community. He has been dehumanized by his community’s refusal to see him as a whole person, as a complete human being.

Jesus comes along and what’s the first thing the text tells us he does? He **sees** the man. Jesus recognizes this man’s humanity. He also sees how his blindness has resulted in his dehumanization. After this seeing Jesus then acts out of compassion to not just restore his sight, but to remove the label his neighbors have reduced him to. Jesus sees this man and forces others to see him too.

But we don’t like that do we? It’s far easier for us to stubbornly hold on to the labels we have assigned others. It’s easier to not recognize the complexity and messiness of another’s humanity. We want to be right about our judgement of others. We want to be right about the boxes we’ve forced people into. So when Jesus comes along and challenges our labels...challenges our propensity to dehumanize one another, we get angry.

The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, wrote a poem about this phenomenon entitled, *The Place Where We Are Right*:

“From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.”

We travel well-worn paths of judgement and self-righteousness. Well-worn paths of labeling others and then ignoring them. Well-worn paths of complacency and sightlessness. And these well-worn paths make our hearts hard. And hard hearts find it difficult to love God and to love neighbor. Hard

hearts make it difficult to see the loving works of God. Hard hearts make it nigh impossible to truly see the people around us.

“But doubts and loves Dig up the world” the poem says. Seeing, the way Christ sees, will soften our hard hearts. Doubts about our judgement of others will plow up the well-worn path of dehumanization. Viewing one another through the lens of God’s *agape* love undermines the hatred beneath those well-worn paths.

But this seeing is costly. It will put us at odds with the world that loves to keep people in their place. It will mean stepping between the oppressor and the oppressed. It means giving up the comfort of labeling others then dismissing them. It means putting in the effort to get to know the people around us. It means entering into the messy complexity of humanity with love instead of judgement.

The man born blind shows us this cost. When others are forced to see his humanity they resort to argument and persist in their judgements and labels. Both he and his parents face the threat of excommunication because the leaders of the community cannot have people truly seeing one another. That might lead to difficult questions that could disrupt the power of the status quo. The status quo that taught that this man’s blindness must be a result of personal or familial sin.

I wonder what the world would be like if instead of looking at one another and seeing a laundry list of labels: conservative, progressive, straight, queer, Christian, Muslim, transgender, cis-gender, American, Russian, patriot, anarchist, athlete, slob, success, failure, or whatever else. Instead of those labels, what if we saw beloved children of God. What if we saw people whom God created and whom God loves passionately. People who are struggling with all sorts of hidden, and not-so-hidden, challenges, traumas, and pain. People who often don’t understand their own motivations, the “why” behind what they do. People who are always more complex and messier than we’re often willing to acknowledge.

This sort of seeing will make our lives infinitely more complex and nuanced. But it will also soften our hard hearts. It will tear up the well-worn paths of where we are right and allow for seeds of loving relationship to be planted there instead. And who knows? Perhaps with softer hearts we might see the loving work of God in the world and rejoice rather than rage! Perhaps seeing the way Christ sees will cause us to ask the tough questions about how we’ve

structured our values and communities. Tough questions that could disrupt the status quo and may even lead to a new kingdom...God's kingdom. Where all are seen and accepted and loved. And as far as I am concerned, that's worth any price. Amen.