

Fear & Loathing in Jerusalem  
John 9:1-41  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
March 26, 2017 / Fourth Sunday of Lent

Like last Sunday, there is a lot going on with the selection today. Jesus addresses an issue on sinning; heals a blind man, who is then questioned by the Pharisees twice, as well as his parents, and ultimately being expelled from a synagogue; and then Jesus returns to find the formerly blind man and reassures him in his beliefs, that he is no longer spiritually blind as well. And just as Jesus accepted the blind man after he was abandoned by his community, Jesus finds us when we are in difficulties and still keep faith in Him.

To begin this chapter, Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Festival of the Tabernacles, and He was just driven from the Temple after a disagreement at the end of the last chapter.

He encounters a Blind Man and the Disciples ask about who had sinned to cause the man's blindness. Back then, maladies, disfigurements, and blemishes were tied to sin. If you developed leprosy, you did something to deserve it. However, if you were born with one, it indicated that your parents had sinned and that was their punishment. So, Jesus is taking this opportunity to do away with that sort of thinking.

Then He makes some mud and uses it to perform the miracle. Now, here's the thing. It is okay with everyone that Jesus is performing miracles. That sort of thing was actually expected and looked for. There is a rule in the Book of Deuteronomy that says this is one of the ways how a prophet or other person sent from God proves their identity. That's not the problem here. What the Pharisees have their initial problem with is when and how Jesus did it this time.

The Fourth Commandment is to keep the Sabbath holy and not work on that day. The word that is translated into English as “work” doesn't really mean what we usually envision when we think of “work.” Anywhere else this word is used, it refers to something being crafted or created, so a more literal translation would be to forbid using creative energy.

The Rabbis have identified 39 types of creative energy that were forbidden on the Sabbath. And I figured an easy way to describe them: Imagine yourself all dressed up and before you is a table with a candle-lit dinner. There's steak, potatoes, rolls, wine, and salad. Now imagine all the actions you would have to do to make all of these things from scratch, starting with an empty field. Take everything through producing the plants or the paddocks holding the animals or the orchards supplying wood and fruits; through all the harvesting; through the chopping the vegetables, the cooking of the meat, the crafting of the tables and candles, the baking, the fermenting, the weaving and cobbling, even lighting the candle; all of that is not allowed on the Sabbath.

Well, that covers 38 of the 39. What Jesus did was the 39<sup>th</sup> creative activity, which is adding the finishing touch. Think of cup a noodle soup. It's nearly complete in its cup, you just need to add some hot water and that's adding the finishing touch. Jesus picked up some dirt, added the finishing touch of His spit, and so created mud with the intention of use on the Sabbath, and that's why the Pharisees are all upset.

It is worth noting that after the time of Jesus, the Rabbis decided on exceptions to these rules. If a life is in danger, or even suspected to be in peril, you are required to act on the Sabbath. If there is a fire, and there is only going to be property damage, you must let it burn, however, if there is a possibility that someone is inside, then the fire must be put out. Or recovery operations at accidents and disasters. Doctors are required to perform life-saving procedures on the Sabbath. In fact, most Rabbis later agreed that under these guidelines, all of the miracles by Jesus that were performed on the Sabbath would not be a problem.

So then, Jesus sends the former blind man to a pool for cleansing and to be examined, which is in keeping with all the appropriate Bible rules and traditions for those who perform healing miracles. And then people marveled at the man who can now see, and bring him to the Pharisees, who start an investigation.

The Pharisees are having a problem here. Some feel that Jesus cannot be from God because He broke the Fourth Commandment; but others felt that the miracle proves that He is from God, and therefore is acting for God, on God's Sabbath Day. This first part of the investigation is a normal sort of thing that we can see in all four Gospels.

What John describes next, though, has the feeling of a witch hunt or inquisition. The parents are pulled in to to be interrogated about their son, and they are afraid; then the formerly blind man is dragged back for a second time to be interrogated again, and ultimately is expelled from the synagogue.

Now incidents like this help scholars figure out when the Gospels were written. You do not see any of this level of fear over expulsion or loathing from the Pharisees in Mark, the earliest Gospel. You start to see some of it in Matthew & Luke, written a bit later. Only in John, the last Gospel to be finished, do you see this fear and loathing. This is because scenes like this did not occur during the time of Jesus. All Followers of the Way were Jewish, and at most were seen as a nuisance in the early days. They only started to occur about 40 years after the Crucifixion, when the Jewish Revolt against Rome began; and the arguments described by John reflected the later writings of Followers, not those from the time of Jesus.

Scholars feel that this in part explains John's animosity and loathing towards "the Jews," seeing them as separate from themselves already, a different community and rivals to Jesus and His Followers. This loathing in John unfortunately has been used throughout the millenia as justification for pogroms and anti-Semitic discrimination in Europe and America. A response to the Pharisees using fear of expulsion from the community, drawing lines between the two groups, making them into two groups in reality. This is why John is so angry at them.

Then Jesus goes back to find the formerly blind man when He heard of the incident and expulsion. He speaks to him, and assures him, and stands by him in adversity. Of course Jesus does this. He comes where He is needed.

So there is a lot going on here, and a lot of issues that this story covers. The obvious big ones that are easily covered more often are: The healing on the Sabbath that tells us not to get so bogged down in rules that we forget to serve and help one another; That malady is not caused by sin, so we shouldn't treat people like sinners; Living in community verses in fear with the parent's interrogation; The loathing and separation with the second interrogation; The symbolic blindness and true sight in those who witnessed the miracle.

But then there is an other aspect. The formerly blind man kept the faith through all the fear and loathings of his situation, and endured hardship through his expulsion, and then Jesus comes in to let him know that he did the right thing, that he truly sees. He was the righteous one and Jesus has his back.

The formerly blind man probably could've responded to the Pharisees by saying that he had no idea what happened, that he was just standing there and some guy spread mud on his face and suddenly he could see. That has happened in the Gospels, and the Pharisees just let the person go, because they truly didn't express any opinion that could offend them. The formerly blind man stood up and expressed an opinion and his faith in this man from God. And for that, he lost his place in the community, he was excommunicated by the Pharisees.

Jesus is not going to let someone who stands up for him, to endure the Pharisee's fear and loathing, and gets cut off from the community, go through it alone. Jesus is not about to abandon him, and also us, if we too stand up for Jesus. If we keep our faith in Jesus through any fear or loathing, we will never be truly alone. Jesus will find us and never abandon us.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Ever-present Jesus, You are the Light of the World. Shine Your light in us this day. Chase away the darkness of sin, the darkness of fear and doubt and despair. Fill us with the light of Your truth and Word. Produce in us the fruit of righteousness and the evidence that Your Holy Spirit lives in us and works in us and works through us. Make us a shining example of Your amazing grace, redeeming love, and life-changing power. And may others be drawn to You through us. Amen.

## INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

O God who welcomes all in love, to You we pray for the good of Your church, our community, and the concerns of those in need. We lift up our hearts in faith to You, the one who hears all prayers and holds close all of Creation.

We give you thanks for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

Almighty God, You love us, but we have not always loved You; You call, but we may not have listened. We may have walked away from neighbors in need, we may have been wrapped up in our own concerns. We may have gone along with evil, pride, quarrelling, and divisiveness. Help us to face up to ourselves, so that, as You move toward us in mercy, we may repent, turn to You, and receive mercy;

We pray for everyone who needs Your help. For those who are unwell or wounded in mind, body, or spirit. We pray for the many who do not have enough: enough food to eat, or shelter to keep warm; enough employment, or money to pay their bills; enough medicine or medical care.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to live up to the standard Jesus set for us. We pray for the strength to Follow the Path of Jesus. We pray for calmness and serenity in a chaotic world. We pray that we recognize your messengers and those You send to help us and redirect us for who they are, and that we show the wisdom to heed them.

We especially pray for:

April Stone

The Suddath Family

Gracious God, we offer these prayers and all those of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

## Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

## John 9:1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The 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?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He 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." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then 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." Some 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. So 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."

The 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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but 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." His 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. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So 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." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He 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?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus 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." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.