

6 March 2016

Meaningful Engagement . . . or Moralizing

John 9:1-17

Today we read about another individual encounter with Jesus in the Gospel of John, chapter 9, verses 1-17:

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 neighbours 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.'

Let me just start today by saying that morality is a good thing. I'm in favor of morality, all right? We need it. We need parents to teach it and adults to model it, and church should be where you are most likely to see it displayed. We need public figures who demonstrate at least some grasp of the concept, and we need a society that rewards moral rather than immoral behavior. Morality is necessary for peaceful co-existence in society. For instance, without the moral imperative that honesty is better than lying and cheating, we could not live together with any level of security. All cultures have recognized this and have developed systems of morality which, in essentials, have been a lot alike. All affirm honesty, for instance. All agree that compassion is better than cruelty and most have formulated some version of what we call the golden rule: Treat others the way you wish they would treat you.

So, again, I approve of morality. Got that? I stress that so that you won't be too disturbed by what I'm about to say. It is not, and has never been, the church's job to police morality, *especially* not the moral behavior of people outside the church. The most you can say is that the church should be a moral example for the world. As a group, we should be *more* trustworthy, *more* courageous, *more* compassionate than other people. But even that is not the same as saying that we need to crack down on other people's behavior. Moral behavior should be a *result* of

following Christ, but moral behavior is not the goal. When we make it so, bad things happen to us.

That's when the church becomes hypocritical, for instance. None of us behave morally all the time, so if we are in a church where morality is the goal and measure of faith, we are under tremendous pressure to pretend to be better than we are. Sometimes we pretend so well that we even convince ourselves, in which case we become pious prigs. Second, if a church is seen as being a place for moral people, then she inevitably becomes judgmental and exclusionary. That person is a sinner and so cannot be one of us. Third, churches that are all about morality invariably cherry-pick which moral rules they're going to enforce. In America, sexual sins generally get bonus points on the judgment meter. In years past the highlighted sins were often drinking, smoking, or dancing. Stan Schacht told me once about the Baptist church that some of his forebears attended who removed people from the membership rolls for the sin of "consorting with Methodists."

A little harsh, but you can see where they're coming from.

Finally, when a church takes on morality as its primary purpose, that changes how it responds to the world outside. That church tends to see other people's sins, not their humanity. That church sees outsiders not as people in need of Christ but people in need of correction.

Which takes us to our story in John 9, because all this is what had happened to 1st Century Judaism. Being a good Jew had become all about morality – keeping the rules – and the Pharisees had become the morality police. The Pharisees had taken on the role of determining who was welcome in their worship and who, being a "sinner," was not. This was one of the things that always frustrated the priests about Jesus: they had all these clear lines drawn, and he wouldn't observe them. He ate with the "sinners." And in turn, it was one of the things that always frustrated Jesus about the priests: that they seemed to care more about tiny moral distinctions and miniscule laws than about what he called the "weightier matters of the law" like justice and mercy.

So anyway, Jesus and his disciples pass by this blind beggar, and – having been brought up in a faith that was all about morality – the disciples ask Jesus the obvious question: "Who sinned that this man was born blind? Was it himself? Or his parents?" You see, a faith that focuses on sin always cares deeply about who's to blame. But Jesus replies, "It doesn't have anything to do with sin. This man was born the way he was so as to demonstrate the power of God." That's a fairly radical revision of priorities. Who sinned sometime in the past is irrelevant; what matters is what happens now. Jesus heals the man, which of course causes a stir, and so the former beggar is brought in for questioning by the priests. They are appalled. Just appalled. You see – I should have mentioned this – that day was the sabbath. Working on the sabbath is a sin. "Whoever healed this man is a sinner!" the priests declare. "He broke the sabbath! Don't you agree?" And the man who had been given sight says, "Well, no. I think he's a prophet."

Jesus doesn't care if the man is a sinner; all he cares about is that the man needs help. The man doesn't care whether Jesus is a sinner; all he knows is that Jesus reached out and touched him.

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Jeff was an assistant pastor in a large evangelical church, where he helped lead a small group. One night he went home from the group meeting and realized he couldn't take it any more. The group had spent most of their session talking about what to do about one of their members (not present that night) who was dating two women at the same time. Jeff writes, "On the way home, I just couldn't get over the absurdity of that conversation . . . I started putting all of these pieces together, and I left my job and the church when I realized that we as evangelicals were doing lots of lifestyle indoctrination and very little soul transformation" (p. 101). Mary, another church refugee, was frustrated primarily by the arbitrary nature of the church's moral concern. She writes: "Why do we get so hung up on just a few things? Like, tell me how ignoring the poor is not a moral failure? Why don't pastors ever have to resign for that?" (p. 102). Again and again in interviews, people who have given up on church repeat this theme. They want to do something meaningful for other people, want to demonstrate Christ's love in physical, active, relevant ways, but they found themselves in churches that were concerned more with fixing, or even just condemning, sin. These church refugees were concerned that people were needy, but they felt the church only cared whether they were worthy.

Now this does not mean that those who are "Done" with church are indifferent to sin. None of the people interviewed in the book on church refugees said that sin didn't matter. Many of them, in fact, held very conservative views on, for instance, homosexuality. Their problem with the church was more about the priority that matters of sin took in the church's mind. As one conservative Christian in the study put it, "Can we, as a church, just get everything else right – love your neighbor, feed the poor, all that stuff – and *then* talk about homosexuality? Can we just move that conversation to the bottom of the evangelical priority list?"

I have good news now. As I read this chapter in the book about people who have left the church, I was proud of us. Especially in the past seven or eight years, this church's focus has shifted very much in the direction of meaningful engagement with the world. It's more than just how many ministries we have started or are supporting – the Personal Needs Closet, the Downtown Memory Café, the semi-annual breakfast for the homeless, Ramp Up Marathon County, Community Meals, Mission Guatemala. It's not even the statistics on how many lives we have touched through these ministries. Rather it's the fact that we have come to define ourselves in terms of ministry to others. When I came here as an associate, we were best known as the "Church across the Street from the Y," and how pathetic is that? Defining ourselves by our proximity to someone more memorable. That's not who we are now, is it? We are a church that makes a difference. Let us not let that slip away.

Theologian Diana Butler Bass says that for too long the church has gotten it backwards. She says that there are three Bs of the church, which we normally place in this order: Believing, Behaving, and Belonging. That is, we've normally worried first that everyone believed correctly – had the right doctrine. Then we've focused on behavior – whether people were acting morally. Only then did we get around to Belonging. Bass says we've got to learn to turn that around. First is belonging. We belong to Christ and each other simply because God loves us. The love that we experience in community leads us to love others – that's the behavior part. Then we can focus on beliefs. Like algebra, faith has a correct order of operations. Love in community is first.