



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 4 (A)

Confusion

[RCL] 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

This morning's gospel reading is full of confusion. We have the event itself – Jesus spitting into dirt to make mud, and smearing it all over a blind man's face. But after that, we have a veritable pandemonium – no one can seem to figure out what has happened.

First, we have the neighbors, who can't figure out if this is the same man who used to beg. Same guy? Different guy? He keeps saying, "I am the man," but they can't get their heads around it. He tells them the whole story – beginning to end – and yet they still aren't satisfied.

So, they take him to the Pharisees. He repeats the whole thing, but the Pharisees still don't get it. So, here comes the phone call to the parents, because, he's their son. They should be able to explain what happened! The parents have no clue how to answer the questions, so they turn things back to their son. So, the neighborhood tribunal gets going again, asking what has happened and trying to figure it out.

The subversion of this story, the paradox, is that the one who was once blind is now the only one who can see properly. He is the only one with enough vision to see Jesus, to accept the miraculous healing he has been offered, and to tell people about it. Everyone who lives with sight has the eyes to see what has happened – but they lack the sight to comprehend it.

So, what makes the one able to see Jesus, beyond eyesight, that is, really see, and know, and feel, who Jesus is, and accept his healing? And what makes the others in the story – the parents, the neighbors, the Pharisees – unable to see or understand what's happened?

Part of the answer to that question is in assumptions. At the beginning of the story, the neighbors ask Jesus a question: "Rabbi, who sinned," they ask, "this man, or his parents?" The parameters for the question itself show the assumptions made; someone must be at fault for this because the blindness is understood to be a punishment.

Now, there are two kinds of questions: open questions and closed questions. A closed question might be something like, "Are you okay?" This gives someone firm parameters; the asker is looking for a yes or a no.

A more open way of asking the question might be, “How are you feeling today?” which allows the answerer to talk about anything. The question itself sets up the conversation. The question shows how willing to listen the asker might be.

In this story, the disciples have asked a closed question. They are looking for a simple answer from Jesus: Who sinned, this man or his parents? Jesus moves them out of the binary question and into metaphor, into mystery, which is where healing can happen.

Instead of responding directly to the question the disciples ask, Jesus uses metaphors of light and darkness to explain his own work in the world. Then, he takes dirt, spits on it, rubs it in his hands, and smears it all over the man’s eyes. This physical smearing—this touch and this dirt – creates healing. The man washes in the pool, comes out, and sees.

This is where the chaos begins. Though the disciples have had firsthand witness to this, and though the blind man never wavers in his story, the people just can’t understand what has happened. From the time of their question through the end of this story, their parameters don’t allow them to experience the miracle. Their own assumptions keep them from understanding what has happened.

When do our own assumptions get in our way? Our assumptions about others, and their capabilities? Our assumptions about God?

In our first reading, from the Book of Samuel, we see again how assumptions get in the way. Samuel has been asked to make known the Lord’s chosen one. So, Jesse’s sons pass by Samuel, one by one, and, one by one, Samuel rejects them. The family assumes that one of the older brothers will be chosen, for they are far more capable! They are strong, and attractive men; they assume that these are God’s criteria. But again and again, the parameters of their understanding are pushed aside.

Finally, when David shows up, Samuel hears from God that he is the one, and anoints him. Never mind that David is the youngest, or that he has just been keeping sheep. Never mind that his brothers and his dad assumed he wouldn’t even be considered. God breaks through this closed system, breaking through assumptions and the parameters we attempt to place on God.

Perhaps our word of hope this morning is that God takes all that we presume, all of our assumptions and closed questions, and breaks through them to create miracles. Maybe our good news is that even when we are lost in our confusion and trying to figure out where something came from or how something happened, God is still in the midst of us, working to heal those who are ready.

We are all much more like the disciples than we would care to admit, asking closed questions of Jesus. And we are all much more like David’s brothers than we would care to admit, dismissing the youngest, the one who only works as a shepherd. And we are all much more like the neighbors than we would care to admit, unable to accept the witness given to us, because it doesn’t fit in our worldview.

The good news is this: Our confusion doesn't hinder God's work. Our questions don't stop Jesus from doing good in the world. Our assumptions can't get in the way of the prophets God chooses.

Maybe the invitation for us, then, is to be honest about our confusion and, for the time being, to cease our questions. Let's look around and see where God has been, is, and always will be at work in our world, within us, and within our surroundings. God is breaking through our assumptions. Thanks be to God.

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