

March 12, 2006

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The 7 Miracles of Jesus: 2. Blind Eyes Opened

John 9:24-25

Through these Sundays of Lent we are looking at the seven major miracles of Jesus found in John's Gospel. Last week we used the miracle of the calming of the storm to set the tone and identify some dynamics usually found in events and experiences called miracles. We pointed out that they often come unexpectedly, that they challenge or change the laws of nature, and that miracles hold the power to take away our fear.

Today we're looking at another component of what is often present in what we claim to be miracles; it's found in the story of the blind man who was given the ability to see. This miracle story holds the distinction of being the lengthiest in the Bible. It takes all forty-one verses in chapter nine to be told. In the lectionary lesson you heard only twelve verses and in my sermon scripture a few more.

Much of the remaining part has to do with the fact that the religious authorities didn't believe he'd been blind in the first place. They bring him before the council of the Pharisees, in a setting that we could liken to testifying before a modern day Senate hearing and in an atmosphere that used some of the tactics and strategies still common today.

First they tried to destroy the credibility of the miracle worker. Only people of God can perform miracles, they argued, and since Jesus had carried out this deed on the Sabbath ...a day of rest...he was disrespectful of God and God's laws. To build a case they also tried to destroy the credibility of the miracle receiver by bringing in the blind man's parents to testify to determine if he really had been blind since birth. *His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹ 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."* ²² *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.* ²³ *Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."* John 9:21-23 NRSV

Certainly says something about their parenting doesn't it? They are afraid of being put out of the synagogue if they acknowledge Jesus as being responsible for healing their son when they should be jumping for joy. If the price of my son's healing was to be expelled from the church I'd be gone before they'd finished reading the indictment.

But the Senate hearings carried over to a second day and the blind man who could now see was called back again. The Pharisees stuck to the same strategy of discrediting Jesus. This time they insisted that the man give God the credit for his miracle. *“What did this Jesus really do to you, how did he open your eyes?” “We went over this yesterday Senator and you wouldn’t listen. Do you want me to tell you again? How he spit in the mud and made a clay paste and rubbed it on my eyes. How he told me to go wash in the Pool of Siloam and when the paste was rinsed away I could see. Glory be I could see!”*

With that image fresh in our minds, let me take an entirely different but parallel path. One of the ways NBC tried to improve ratings during coverage of the Winter Olympic Games was to do mini-travelogues of the Italian countryside. On one occasion a reporter toured the oldest bell foundry and company in Europe. Not far from Turin, this company is responsible for many of the centuries old steeple bells that ring in village and city churches and cathedrals. The craftsmanship is superb with custom designs made to order. They had just cast a large bronze bell for a new bell tower near Rome.

There wasn’t much to see. The bell was completely encased in the clay that had formed the mold. The reporter was invited to chip away the clay so people could get a glimpse of the bell. *“Can we ring it now?”* she asked impatiently. *“Not until all the clay is removed,”* said the craftsman, *“and even then it may not have the right tone.”* The clay paste needed to be rinsed away and then glory be, we could ring.

The connection point between the two stories is the clay, something that is applied and then later needs to be removed for the miracle to occur. In the case of the biblical story it’s sight. In the case of the bell story, it’s hearing; both involving what might impede the senses.

When Jesus puts the paste on the man’s eyes the miracle hasn’t occurred, he then gives some instruction to the man himself. Now go to the pool of Siloam and rinse this away. It’s up to the man to do the rest of the work. And like the bell caster that pours the molten elements into the carefully designed mold, it’s up to others to peel away the residue to reveal the finished product.

Could we say that that is sometimes part of the miracle formula? God does the initial work but then leaves the rest up to us. We need to rinse away the clay...remove the impediment.

This is high basketball season...a season when sports miracles appear...when some hope for the unexpected happens, when the laws of nature are challenged and changed, when there is high potential for something that will exert a power to calm our fears. This story might fit those criteria.

A few weeks ago the student manager of the varsity basketball team for Greece Athena High School in Rochester, New York got a chance to play in the last game of the season. The coach asked Jason McElwain to suit up and wait. Nice gesture, but what made the story was the fact that Jason is autistic and physically challenged. When the team was twenty points ahead with four minutes to go Jason was put in the game. A foot shorter than any other player on the floor and moving a little awkwardly, a team mate fed him the ball. His jump shot was an air ball far from the mark. The next time down the floor Jason drove in for a lay up and missed that too.

I imagine the prayer on everyone's tongue was a simple, *"Lord, just let this kid make a basket."* Jason tried again from outside the three point line. The ball had a high arch trajectory and didn't touch the rim at all. Another air ball? No. It was dead center, hitting nothing but net. The crowd erupted. And this wasn't the end of the story. In the remaining three minutes he made six three pointers and another shot to score a total of twenty points. At the buzzer the bleachers emptied of people who flooded onto the courts. Jason was carried away on the shoulders of his team. His mother said, *"I look at autism as the Berlin Wall, and he cracked it."* A miracle. God had made the clay mold and a boy named Jason McElwain had been cast, but he needed to go to the pool of Siloam... to wade onto the basketball court and do his part cracking and rinsing away the clay...the Berlin Wall.

I know there are those who would ask, "Well, what if he missed and scored nothing? What about the miracle formula then?" Some may recall that last week we mentioned Jesus walking on the water. In Matthews' story of that miracle Peter asks to join in. *"Lord, if it is in you bid me come to you on the water."* He said, *"Come."* So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water." But he gets frightened over what seems so impossible and unnatural to do and begins to sink. Wading into his version of the Pool of Siloam he doesn't wash away the impediment. He can't crack the clay of doubt.

The Master Bell Caster said to the reporter that cracking and rinsing away the clay was an important part of the process. *"If it's done carelessly or improperly the tone of the bell might be off-key."* The reporter asked, *"If that happens what do you do?"* The Master Bell Caster replied, *"We try again."*

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