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“Never place a period
where God has placed a comma”

[Grace Allen]



God is still speaking,

UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST



SERMON

“The Seduction of Knowing”

Rev. David P. Weaver

March 2, 2008

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Scripture: John 9:1-41

Growing up in the small town of Hartville, Ohio, is quite a bit different than living in Philadelphia, and now Phoenix. Actually, my parents, my six brothers and I didn't even live in Hartville. We lived in a farmhouse on quiet Hoover Avenue, surrounded by a one-hundred acre cornfield.

The entire area was farm country, but a lot has changed since then. Recently, three more farms near our home sold for millions of dollars and now seven hundred new homes are sprouting up where soy beans, wheat and corn once grew.

But the 1960s were simpler times. Hoover Avenue was a gravel road and along with the occasional car you'd often hear the clip-clop of horse and buggies going by. There were a lot of Amish families in the area who lived quiet, honest and simple lives.

We thought we lived in a pretty diverse neighborhood.

On our quiet street we had four Amish families that used horse and buggies instead of cars. But they were of two different kinds of Amish. You know like there are different kinds of Presbyterians or Lutherans or Baptists?

Well, we had two different kinds of horse and buggy Amish on our street. Both were trying to live simply and believed they knew the right way to do so, but in slightly different ways. They understood the differences, but none of the rest of us did.

Then, there was a “Beachy” Amish family. Folks from that church were permitted to drive cars, but only cars painted black to avoid the sin of pride that often comes with bright colored cars.

There were also two Conservative Mennonite families—one was mine. We drove cars of any color—not that we were proud. But we kept to ourselves, having a keen sense of all that could lead one astray in the world. You know: smoking, drinking, wearing jewelry or makeup, playing cards, and those ever dangerous pool halls.

Then, just across the street was a family who was part of an independent Mennonite church. They enjoyed such a level of certainty about their faith that it was hard for them to know how to relate with the rest of us. So they simply had to split off and start their own church all by themselves.

And right next door to us lived dear old Mattie Hall, who was a wonderful soul, but, in truth, she left us all feeling vaguely uneasy. She was one of those liberal Ohio Conference Mennonites. They were kind-of mainstream Mennonites that you couldn't really tell apart from a good Jew or even a Roman Catholic.

And though we all understood things a bit differently in our neighborhood, all of us believed we knew quite clearly what was right and wrong in life. We had a real sense of clarity about our beliefs.

So in our neighborhood there were—count them—three varieties of Amish, and three varieties of Mennonites. I tell you, we were way ahead of the diversity curve!

So it came as a bit of a surprise to my parents when I came home from school one day in the fourth grade and asked if I could take piano lessons from a Methodist woman in town who, in hindsight, looked a lot like Tammy Faye Baker. I'm pretty sure she purchased red lipstick and rouge by the pound.

“Piano lessons?!” my parents inquired. No one in our church or neighborhood played the piano. Jesus, we were sure, never approved of pianos. You see, the Amish and very conservative Mennonites were taught to use the voices God gave us to create music. We did not need musical instruments.

Yet, I persisted. “Could I please have a piano? I could play Blessed Assurance and Amazing Grace. What could be wrong with that?” Somehow, that music bubbling out of my heart just wouldn't go away.

After a long and very careful period of consideration, my parents went against the authority of our church and the accepted wisdom of our neighborhood, listening to the music in their son's heart, and bought a piano. And Ms. Tammy Faye doted over this little Mennonite boy who wanted to play the piano, and must've found great private amusement in teaching him to play Ave Maria. You've heard of the slippery slope? See where I ended up?

You see, where I come from, there was clarity about what was right and wrong. You learned early not to stand out in a crowd. You listen to authority, we were taught, and you follow the rules. You don't stand out in a crowd.

In our story today from John 9, we have an unassuming man who had the misfortune of standing out in a crowd. He was blind. Now, he didn't literally stand out in a crowd. He was probably sitting off to the side of the road with his hand out, begging for food or money.

But in that day, good people of faith were taught that blindness was a physical and spiritual problem. Listen to this passage from the Bible, Leviticus chapter 21, which was the authoritative scripture that guided good people of faith in that day:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach [the temple] to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, no one who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no one with a crippled foot or hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease, or scabs...

...and the list goes, but I'll spare you. Unfortunately, this poor guy stood out in a crowd. The biblical authority was clear about people like him. He was a sinner with special rules that defined what he could and could not do.

I love the way John tells this story, because I believe this story invites us to reflect on an age-old question facing people of faith: to what authority do we turn to help us answer the question “how then shall we live?” Do we turn to the Bible, to our life experience, to tradition, to reason? Do we make it up as we go? What guides you in making decisions in your daily living? How do you decide what is right or wrong for you?

In today’s story, you might think it was a wonderful thing for a person who was born blind to suddenly be able to see. But not everyone sees it that way. I suspect the reason has something to do with the authority to which the characters turn to decide the question “how then shall we live?”

The Phoenix Art Museum currently has a wonderful exhibition of Illuminated Manuscripts that includes a portion—about fifty pages—of The St. John’s Bible. This is the first handwritten and illuminated Bible created in more than five hundred years, since the advent of the printing press.

On Friday, at the urging of Sandra Wiles, one of our members who works at the Museum, and Sherrell Miller, who docents at the Museum, I finally went to see it.

It’s a beautiful work of art, and reminds me that Jews, Christians and Muslims have all been called “people of the book.” We love words. Like most humans, we are enamored with knowing and understanding the truth. And we, in particular, are drawn to having what we know put down in writing.

You might say that we’ve come by this trait honestly. In fact, Hebrew scripture tells us that Moses was given truth, The Ten Commandments, directly from God Almighty written on stone tablets. So you could argue that we’ve gotten our love of writing truth from a pretty good source.

One of the more intriguing illuminations in The St. John’s Bible is the one that portrays Exodus 20:1-26, The Ten Commandments. Artist Thomas Ingmire depicts the creation of the moral universe. In it he envisions this jumble of random individual letters that slowly come together to reveal a sense of order in the Ten Commandments. Ingmire portrays God’s law bringing order to the chaos of human affairs.

Words have a way of doing that. At least we would like words to bring order out of things that we don’t fully understand.

In today’s story, the good faithful people of that day are intent on following God’s word as they understand it. They rely on their book to bring order out of chaos.

The word for these people is incredibly powerful. In their book God merely speaks a word and creation comes into being. In their book, Moses speaks a word and the Red Sea parts, delivering them from slavery to freedom. In their book, God meets Moses and the people at Mt. Sinai, and makes a covenant with them, a covenant based on words.

Obey my voice and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you so that it may be well with you. Obey my voice and I will be your God and you shall be my people.

So the good faithful people in today's story take their commitment seriously. They are intent upon following the law, to the letter. This is the one authority which guides their lives. They know from their book what God wants from them regarding the Sabbath. God wants them to rest.

So regardless of how many times the healed man explains how he came to see, it is not going to satisfy them because Jesus broke the law. When Jesus bent down and made mud and spread it on the man's eyes, he worked on the Sabbath. So, if the good people of faith let this violation go, the whole house of cards could come tumbling down.

They've backed themselves into the corner by following only one source of authority, only one source of truth: their particular understanding of the written word, the Bible.

But the man who's been healed is not confined in this way. At first he plays it safe, just explaining exactly what has happened to him. "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, told me to go to the pool and wash. I went and washed and now I can see."

Does he really explain how he was healed? No, he doesn't. He states the facts. He states what happened, because he cannot explain how it happened. He cannot really explain the miracle that restored his sight. The question that the good people of faith ask four or five times, "How did it happen?" is not a question that he can honestly answer.

So he plays it safe, but when they press him again and again, he finally begins to interpret the meaning of what happened. He cannot explain how it happened, but he can begin to muse about "What does this mean?"

When pressured to say what he thinks about Jesus, at first he says "He is a prophet." Then, he says "I don't know whether he's a sinner." Next, he says, "He must come from God." Finally, near the end of the story when Jesus reveals himself fully to him, he responds, "Lord, I believe."

The blind man allows several sources of authority, the Bible, his life experience, and reason, to inform his understanding of what is good and right.

He could have discounted his own experience because the religious authorities insisted that what had happened was wrong according to the scripture. He could have thrown out the Bible because his good experience seems to contradict the common understanding of how to observe the Sabbath, and so the Bible must be irrelevant.

But instead he holds these two sources of authority together, using a third source—reason—in the process. And in doing so, there is room for his understanding to be transformed. This amazing experience can't really be explained by words but nonetheless he knows and accepts that it is real and good.

I must say, I find this simple man's actions very impressive.

I wonder if I had been blind and had been healed, and if all these important people who had ignored me all these years sitting by the side of the road were questioning me over and over, demanding that I explain what happened, and why it happened, and how it happened, and who did it, and what did I think about what had happened....there's a part of me that might have wanted to slink back over to side of the road, and hold out my beggar's hand and pretend to be blind again.

It's so much easier to simply appeal to one source of authority, like our understanding of the Bible, or our life experience. The alternative for the church and for each of us in holding several sources of authority side by side—like the Bible, our life experiences, reason, perhaps church tradition—is risky. It can be messy having to think through the complexities of it all, and worse yet, we may end up with an answer that is different than most everyone else.

It might leave us standing out in the crowd. And when you stand out in a crowd you can get yourself into a heap of trouble. Much safer to stay in the box that people have for you. Better to just do it the way it's always been done. It's understandable. It leaves everyone feeling good and secure.

It's the seduction of knowing.

It's also deadly.

When we decide to take risks as people of faith, we may find ourselves opening up to the possibility that God is doing a new thing.

When Jesus finds the man after he's been excommunicated he asks him "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" And true to form, this honest man doesn't simply say "yes" or "no." He asks a question, "Who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe. Jesus replies, "You have seen him. The one speaking with you is he." Then the man who'd been healed takes a risk, a leap of faith, and says "I believe."

In this season of Lent, I have a hunch that the blind man and the One who healed him may have something to say to each one of us in our own lives.

They may have something to say about allowing our own life experiences to interact honestly with the Bible, with church tradition, with reason, and other external authorities that we value. They may be inviting us to recognize that God's action in history cannot be limited by our understanding.

The frightening thing about taking a risk is that we never know where God might lead us.

The exciting thing about taking a risk is that we never know where God might lead us.

Amen.