

“Who Is In Charge?”

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14;
John 9:1-41

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So this story is about a healing, right? A healing that Jesus does of a blind man. It certainly is at least that—a story about the healing of a man born blind, but the blindness seems to get passed around a little bit. Perhaps the story really starts with the question the disciples ask. Who’s fault was it? Who sinned, the parents or this man, that he is blind? That was a common conception of the day. If there was something wrong with someone, they must have sinned. I always appreciate that Jesus’ answer here was that neither of them sinned. It wasn’t their fault, but God can do something with this situation anyway.

I wonder sometimes if the question from the disciples is a little bit about what causes suffering? Jesus seems to by-pass that question and says, “I’m not going to tell you about the cause, but we’re going to look at what we can do now, what the opportunity is. We can give glory to God.” What he does is heal the man.

In physics, there is a phrase that suggests every action has an opposite reaction. It’s kind of like that here. Oftentimes we get these stories of healing and often that’s it. It’s a wonderful event. But we know that when something changes, it affects people. The initial effect we see is that when the man comes back, people wonder, “Are you the same guy? Are you the right person?” They want to try to figure it out, so they take him to the Pharisees and say, “This is what he says happened.”

So the Pharisees, the religious leaders of that time in that area, begin this conversation. They say, “Well, can this really have happened?” Talking first about Jesus, the man says, “Jesus did this for me.” They say, “No, he’s a sinner. He couldn’t have done this.” The guy says, “I don’t know if he’s a sinner, but I know what he did for me.” Through this, he’s beginning to understand what’s happening, even if the Pharisees aren’t. He says, “I don’t know who he is, but I recognize God doesn’t listen to sinners. He healed me so, wow, he’s not a sinner. He’s a prophet!” At the same time the Pharisees are going back and forth: We think he’s a sinner, yet he did this incredible act. So you have these two factions of Pharisees. They’re not quite sure where to go, but when the blind man seems to be teaching them, they get a little uppity and say, “You’re a sinner. Who are you trying to teach us?”

It’s interesting, this whole thing about sin. The first question is about sin, the Pharisees are talking about sin, and as we talked about a couple of weeks ago, we often begin to think about sin as a particular act, not doing the right thing. But sin is really more than a particular act. It’s about whether we are in some way in collusion with evil. Another way of saying it, I think, is do we have a broken relationship with God.

So there is something we’re talking about here that really is sin. But what are they talking about as sin? What is the sin they are pointing to that Jesus has done? It’s simply that he hasn’t lived up to their way of thinking about the Sabbath, their set of rules. As they begin to use this label of “sinner” they are able to write off what Jesus does.

We don't do anything like that, do we? Do we write somebody off because they are—well, we probably don't say *sinner* today. We might use another word. Maybe they are a liberal or a conservative. You can decide. If we put somebody into a camp, then do we have to listen to them? That's what they've done with Jesus. They put him into a camp and decided they don't have to listen to him; he's a sinner.

They point way back in history to Moses, and what Moses did. But what about what God is doing in the present? Their decisions, their way of deciding who Jesus is by putting him in a camp has consequences, and the consequences are they don't hear what God is doing in the present.

It makes me wonder how many times it is easy to do that ourselves. Why might I do that? It's a lot easier if somebody is not agreeing with me to just write them off than to try to figure it out. If he's doing something as unusual as healing people and I can't find a way to write him off, maybe I need to listen to him. But what happens if I start to listen to him? Jesus may not tell me I'm doing quite the right thing—getting back to sin—and I don't want to change. There are a lot of ways I'm pretty happy with the way things are. Especially if you're a Pharisee and you feel in charge, do you want to have to listen to Jesus now?

It feels that way throughout our lives that there's a struggle with who do we listen to. What begins to fit? We create that set of ideas, the ways of understanding that fit. And then do we decide if Jesus fits? Does Jesus fit into my way of thinking? Are there things about my way of thinking that I'm going to tell Jesus he's wrong? How do I follow Jesus?

Once there was a king, and his advisors and all the people in his court were eager to please him. They told him that he was so powerful that anything he commanded would be done. "Anything?" asked the king. "Yes, anything," they replied. So he took them all down to the sea, where the tide was starting to come in. "Anything I command will be done?" he asked again. "Anything!" they answered. So the king turned to the sea and said, "I command the tide to stop." Of course, the tide continued to come in. "You see," said the king, "I cannot do everything. I am not in charge; God is."

I feel like Jesus is outside any of our partial conceptions, and continually allowing him to be in charge matters. The interesting thing is that in this particular passage Jesus doesn't preach what is important to him. We were talking in Sunday School this morning about how in our lives people who helped show us the faith often didn't tell us about it, but they showed it to us by how they acted and what they did. In this story it feels like Jesus shows us what's important to him by what he does rather than with words. It's more important for him to heal somebody than to keep the Sabbath. He puts compassion first, healing first, the love for another first. In doing so, he shows us who he is and what he's about and what God is about in coming through him.

If we are to follow him, if we are to let him guide our lives, what's going to be central to him is compassion, healing, grace. All of our other ways of seeing the world, we have to push against with that—the grace of God in Christ, the compassion he shows, the healing he wants. Sometimes that pushes me in ways that aren't comfortable. It makes me wonder and continue to ask the question—a real Lenten question—who's in charge? Who

do I listen to? What do I allow to guide my life? That was the question the Pharisees were answering. It's the question of Lent.

Do we follow Christ? Do we let compassion and healing and grace that Christ brings to bring us back into relationship with God and with one another? Can that be central even when it doesn't fit into the way I already see things? Do I recognize when I need to adjust rather than trying to get Jesus to adjust?

I can't stop the sea. I know I'm not in charge. Christ is. It's a question for Lent. Amen.