"I Was Blind But Now I See"

John 9:1-12
As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. 4We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” 6When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, 7saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

8The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” 9Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” 10But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” 11He 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.” 12They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

John 9:13-38
13They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15Then 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.” 16Some 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. 17So 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.” 18The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” 20His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21but 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.” 22His 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. 23Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

24So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” 25He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” 26They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” 27He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” 28Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” 30The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he
does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32 Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” 34 They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

35 Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” 36 He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” 37 Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” 38 He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

I grew up in a storytelling household. My mother, who has a wonderful sense of humor, was good at retelling events in a way that held people’s attention. Everything from a collapsed birthday cake to a forgotten lunch bag to a dropped communion wafer in church became fodder for a good story. In fact, story-telling is such a big part of my life that often when funny or significant things happen, my first thought is that it will be fun to tell about. I’ve heard similar lines of thought from people who blog or post on Facebook often. It’s as if the re-telling of the experience is as important as the experience itself. In fact, sometimes it seems that the experience is only valuable inasmuch as it can be retold.

In John’s gospel, the recounting of experiences that people have with Jesus is called testimony. Testimony is a major theme in the gospel, set up as such in the opening chapter when John writes that John the Baptist came to “testify to the light.” John the Baptist himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. If you remember Pastor Ken’s sermon about him, you may recall the painting of John the Baptist pointing away from himself. In a way, John the Baptist pointing to Christ, telling other people to pay attention to him, became the poster child of the gospel. Everyone who has faith in this gospel takes on the same pointing stance. The Samaritan woman at the well ran to tell the people in her village that Jesus told her everything she had ever done. Mary Magdalene ran from the garden to tell the disciples she had seen the risen Jesus. In these stories, and in most stories, the pointing, or the testimony came at the end of the passage, after they come to believe in the one they had seen.

In John 9, however, testimony is not a way to wrap up the action; it is the subject of the story. There is a man who is born blind introduced in the first verse. By verse 7, Jesus has healed him. Then, the story goes on for thirty-four more verses, centering not around the man’s healing or his interaction with Jesus, but around his testimony of what happened to him. This story is not about a blind man being healed; it’s about what the blind man said about being healed.

And what he said was fairly simple; he retold the event. In verse 11, he tells the neighbors, “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.” There’s testimony #1. The Pharisees come around and ask, “How did you receive your sight?” The man tells his story: “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see” – testimony #2. The man’s parents also give their testimony, although having not seen the event for themselves, they point their finger straight back to their son. “He is of age. Ask him!” The Pharisees are troubled at this point because Jesus has healed on a Sabbath, which was a big no-no. They want the man to say more about Jesus, perhaps about his identity and the claims he was making so they would have grounds to arrest
him. But the man’s third testimony remains clear. He cannot explain why Jesus chose to heal him at all, let alone on the Sabbath, or where the power came from. “One thing I do know,” he says, “that though I was blind, now I see.” This brief statement about what happened – Jesus’ action that changed his life – rings out like a clear bell at the center of this story. This man’s testimony becomes as important to the life of the church as the experience itself.

John 9 reminds us that testimony is not a peripheral, “it-would-be nice-if-we-ever-got-to-it” task of the church. Testimony is at the center of our life together. When we share about the changes we’ve seen within ourselves because of what God is doing, the church is most alive.

With the advent of blogs – online journals – more ordinary people are getting their stories out there. One story I’ve followed recently is about the journey of a young woman who used to be in my youth group. Deanna was a super-social teenager, more interested in clothes and friends and boys and her new cell phone than about belief in Jesus. Because Deanna enjoyed the adventure of the high school mission trips she went on, she signed up for a summer-long mission trip to South America through her college church. According to her blog, she met Jesus there in the faces of her host parents and the children she worked with – people who had very little in terms of material possessions but who were rich in faith and love. After the trip, Deanna shifted her spending habits so that she could save up for another trip, she volunteered her time with Spanish-speaking children in an elementary school, she changed her major to International Law with the hope that she could someday be a voice for the voiceless. All that she has written, along with the changes in her life testify to God’s work in her. “I was blind, but now I see.”

I’ve also started reading a memoir written by a man named Gary who, through a ministry in his church, became involved in visiting residents in a low-income housing unit in downtown Portland. Before he began visiting, he held some of the same misconceptions about the homeless and the near homeless that many people living at a distance hold. But soon, Gary met Stewart, a 35-year-old man with cerebral palsy, and started taking him to doctor’s appointments. Gary wrote, “With Stewart, what you see is what you get. If he is happy, it is all there; if he is sad, one has no doubt. That is often the way for people with no power, no money, no exterior beauty. They have nothing to prove. And so Stewart is nonthreatening. He crashes through my defenses. He brings out what is good, whole, and deep down in me: the ability to love tenderly, speak truthfully, receive openly, and face gently my own weaknesses.” Visiting the poor has been the means by which God has altered Gary’s understanding of himself. “I was blind, but now I see.”

Stories like these are the lifeblood of the church. They are signs that God is still active, still powerful to bring change. Still, some people will say they don’t have a story. “I’ve never had a big conversion moment, they say. “No total life reorientation, no healing from an addiction, no miraculous health turnaround.” But like my mother taught me, there are potential stories happening all around us – it’s all in how you look at the world. “I was blind but now I see” can be about a perspective shift just as much as about physical healing or radical conversion. It can describe small but significant changes in life: of despair turning to hope, of fear turning to love, of apathy turning to compassion. Sometimes, we just need to recognize the moments in our lives where God has been at work.
There is an old spiritual practice that is still alive in some Catholic circles called “the daily examen.” At the end of a day, you quiet yourself and call to mind the events – both internal and external--of the day. You recall how you felt, how you responded to the events of your day, and you ask yourself, “Where was God in it all?” The daily examen is a way of looking for points of transformation so that we might say, “I was blind, but now I see.” A more communal practice would be to adapt the daily examen for a dinnertime conversation. Instead of asking, “How was your day?”, we might ask one another, “Where did you see God at work today?” Together, we can sniff out the stories that deserve to be told and re-told.

At the end of the blind man’s story, interestingly, comes a statement of belief. Jesus comes back to him after the man has been “driven out” by the Pharisees and reveals his identity to him as the Son of Man. “Lord, I believe,” the man says. His belief in Jesus follows his testimony about him. The man told the story of his healing before fully believing in or understanding the One who healed him.

Usually we assume that faith fuels testimony. But this story shows us that testimony fuels faith! Belief, trust, in God is built as we live with a sense of God’s presence and try to articulate it to ourselves and to others. That would mean that Deanna, the young woman who went to South America and is setting the course for her life accordingly, is just beginning to see who God is. It would mean that Gary in downtown Portland, in the act of visiting Stewart and reflecting about his own transformation, is just beginning to understand the love of God.

The story of the blind man’s testimony shows that our ability to see God in God’s fullness, is limited this side of heaven. None of us will fully believe until we meet God face to face. Until then, we watch for God’s activity – we look for story material – and we testify. “I was blind, but now I see.”

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i Gary Smith, Radical Compassion: Finding Christ in the Heart of the Poor. (Loyola Press, 2002) p. 2