

## John 9

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth. 2 Jesus' disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?"

3 Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents. This happened so that God's mighty works might be displayed in him. 4 While it's daytime, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. 5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 After he said this, he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man's eyes. 7 Jesus said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (this word means sent). So the man went away and washed. When he returned, he could see.

Disagreement about the healing

8 The man's neighbors and those who used to see him when he was a beggar said, "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?"

9 Some said, "It is," and others said, "No, it's someone who looks like him."

But the man said, "Yes, it's me!"

10 So they asked him, "How are you now able to see?"

11 He answered, "The man they call Jesus made mud, smeared it on my eyes, and said, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and then I could see."

12 They asked, "Where is this man?"

He replied, "I don't know."

13 Then they led the man who had been born blind to the Pharisees. 14 Now Jesus made the mud and smeared it on the man's eyes on a Sabbath day. 15 So Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see.

The man told them, "He put mud on my eyes, I washed, and now I see."

16 Some Pharisees said, "This man isn't from God, because he breaks the Sabbath law." Others said, "How can a sinner do miraculous signs like these?" So they were divided. 17 Some of the Pharisees questioned the man who had been born blind again: "What do you have to say about him, since he healed your eyes?"

He replied, "He's a prophet."

18 The Jewish leaders didn't believe the man had been blind and received his sight until they called for his parents. 19 The Jewish leaders asked them, "Is this your son? Are you saying he

was born blind? How can he now see?"

20 His parents answered, "We know he is our son. We know he was born blind. 21 But we don't know how he now sees, and we don't know who healed his eyes. Ask him. He's old enough to speak for himself." 22 His parents said this because they feared the Jewish authorities. This is because the Jewish authorities had already decided that whoever confessed Jesus to be the Christ would be expelled from the synagogue. 23 That's why his parents said, "He's old enough. Ask him."

24 Therefore, they called a second time for the man who had been born blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner."

25 The man answered, "I don't know whether he's a sinner. Here's what I do know: I was blind and now I see." 26 They questioned him: "What did he do to you? How did he heal your eyes?"

27 He replied, "I already told you, and you didn't listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"

28 They insulted him: "You are his disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. 29 We know that God spoke to Moses, but we don't know where this man is from."

30 The man answered, "This is incredible! You don't know where he is from, yet he healed my eyes! 31 We know that God doesn't listen to sinners. God listens to anyone who is devout and does God's will. 32 No one has ever heard of a healing of the eyes of someone born blind. 33 If this man wasn't from God, he couldn't do this."

34 They responded, "You were born completely in sin! How is it that you dare to teach us?" Then they expelled him.

35 Jesus heard they had expelled the man born blind. Finding him, Jesus said, "Do you believe in the Human One?"[a]

36 He answered, "Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him."

37 Jesus said, "You have seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you." 38 The man said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped Jesus.

39 Jesus said, "I have come into the world to exercise judgment so that those who don't see can see and those who see will become blind."

40 Some Pharisees who were with him heard what he said and asked, "Surely we aren't blind, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you wouldn't have any sin, but now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

## Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Amen.

What's in a name? That question was perhaps most famously posed by William Shakespeare before his even more frequently quoted line, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." His point, of course, was that whatever you might call this little flower, beauty of sight and smell remained the same, and the same was true for Romeo's beloved, Juliette, despite her being a member of a rival family. For Shakespeare, and his character Romeo, names didn't mean much. To 90's kids like me, though, the question might sound more familiar from Green Day's classic, *Fashion Victim*. The chorus to that song, over and over again, asked, "What's in a name?" However, rather than romanticizing about the beauty of a potential mate and the nature of love, Billy Joe Armstrong and

the rest of his band mates were lamenting the hypocrisy so prevalent in our culture. Since so many people rely on their job titles or their physical appearance for their identities, rather than their actions or integrity, names mean precious little. Those names might sound glamorous or appear beautiful, but the way they lived was quite ugly. What's in a name? Still not much according late 20th century punk rock.

But for us, who are learning to share our spiritual stories, names mean a lot, and one name stands out above the rest: Jesus. When we share our stories, we must remember that Jesus is the center of our story. We can't tell spiritual stories without the name of God, the one who gives the spirit of life to our lives. We've got to cross that awkward line in the conversational sand and actually refer to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit, to however we name that divine power alive and at work in the world. What's in a name? For our

stories to have their greatest potential for transformation, we've got to speak the name of Jesus.

Look at the example of the blind man who Jesus heals in John 9. When the Pharisees gawk at his newfound sight and ask how that happened, he responds like this: "The man they call Jesus made mud, smeared it on my eyes, and said, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and then I could see." The man names God's work, follows God's call, and gives God credit. And at every following juncture, he once again references not what he's done, but what God's done that's changed his life.

Now, it might feel odd for us to tell these kind of stories. We've adopted into our vernacular a number of ways that remove God from our common parlance. Rather than give the Lord credit for active work in our lives, we tend to refer to "chance" or "luck." For instance, if we happen to get a new job that we love, we might say, "You know, I'm just really fortunate that they chose me." But, if

we believe that we have vocations from God to make the world a better place, and that God's prepared you for that next step, why not say "You know, God's been so good to men throughout this process. I'm thankful that the Holy Spirit opened this opportunity to me, and I'm going to try to use it to bless people as a reflection of how God's blessed me." Now, putting God at the center of our stories - speaking the name of Jesus - is much more comprehensive than just this slight shift in the way that we use language. But to begin with this recognition is a good start. As we follow God's call in our lives, naming God's work and giving God credit can become natural to us if we let it.

Think about how much, in theological terms, we say that God does for us - give us air to breathe, food to eat, friends for relationship, family for support, towns for civic life, skills to use in our vocations, talents to use in our play. Then, consider how often are we willing to name God as central to each one of those things.

I'm guessing we don't name God nearly as often as we believe that God's at work on our behalf. Now, I don't ask these to shame anyone, because I too struggle to consistently give Jesus the credit for all the things he does in my life. One of my professors, Dr. Esther Acolatse, grew up in Ghana and saw the power of Jesus's name in our lives. In a psychology and religion course, she one time asked, "Where's the power of being a Christian if we're not willing to say the name of Christ?"

Here's a totally untested assumption that rings true, at least to me. People are less likely to participate in church in our culture because they don't hear about ways that God's positively impacting the world in which we live. They're left with a negative impression of God and God's people, so why become a part of God's community? The loudest voices too often yell lies about God, like Westboro Baptist spewing their hatred against the LGBTQ+ community, framing Jesus as so hateful that he'd cause

natural disasters and terrorist attacks because of gay people. That's most certainly not the God we know in Jesus, but that's what people hear at such high volumes. Or people hear the cotton candy version of God's story known as the Prosperity Gospel, the one that says faithfulness will always lead to health, wealth and happiness. Now, that sounds really nice, but it altogether ignores Jesus's words about the blessedness of people in poverty, his call for disciples' to take up their cross - which of course is an instrument of physical suffering - and the early church's self-sacrificial lifestyle, preferring deep faithfulness to trite happiness. Despite how loud they are in our culture, these messages are lies about God. But if people mostly hear that God is full of hatred against gay people, or women's leadership, or racial equality, or that God abandons the poor, the sick, and depressed for the richest, smileliest, physical specimens, then what reason

would new people have to come to a church? Why would anyone want to meet that God?

If we speak the name of Jesus in ways that tells the truth of God's goodness, we can turn the tide of God's public profile away from superficiality and from hatred and toward the fullness of God that we find in Jesus Christ. You may have heard someone say that, "you might be the only Bible that someone's ever read." Now, while that's a bit simplistic, there's a truth to the comment. Namely, with our words and deeds we're able to introduce people to the wonderful, beautiful truth about God. We can speak God's word of life into their lives when the majority of what they hear about God is at best superficial and at worst deadly.

That's why it's so important for us to name God's work and give God credit as we follow God's call. If we believe that God's got the power of salvation, which we do, and the words that people do often hear about God point away from who God is, then

our stories may be God's means of grace in their lives. Sharing our stories is not just about growing our church, but about reconnecting people with the God who so deeply loves them. Our life and their life is tied together. Just as Dr. King rightly understood that a threat to justice anywhere threatens justice everywhere, so we may see that the abundant life others find in God actually enriches our abundant life with God. Our lives, in justice and in abundant life, are intrinsically connected. That's the mutuality, the intersectionality, of our lives as the Body of Christ. When we invite people to rediscover the power of God's presence in their lives, to taste and see that the lord is good, we make space not just for their individual salvation, but for the entire church to experience God more fully.

When we share the story of God's activity in our lives in order to introduce people to God's goodness and God's intention for their lives to be vibrant expressions of that goodness, it's not

selfish, nor is it inappropriate. It is, in fact, one of the most faithful things we can do. The task before us, then, is to learn to speak the name of Jesus - to name God's work, follow God's call, and give God credit - in ways that open God's good news to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

So, our task for today is a simple one. Think of someone that you know who might benefit from being a part of this faith community, and think of how you can honestly, gently, and truthfully talk about the way you've seen God at work here. Maybe through Highlander Lutherans. Maybe through wellness ministries or yoga. Maybe through the Rough Draught Coffee House or Faith and Film. Maybe through worship, fellowship, or educational opportunities. If you aren't quite sure how to tell those stories with God at the center, just start like this: "God's really been active in worship lately" or "God's really up to something through our campus ministry" or "It's so exciting to see God changing lives

through spiritual disciplines like yoga and prayer.” How might you name God’s work, follow God’s call, and give God credit in a way that helps connect someone new with this community of faith?