

March 26, 2017

TEXT: John 9:1–34

TITLE: Unfaithful Phrases: You Can't Teach Me a Thing

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Sometimes before going to bed at night, we lay out the clothes we'll wear the next day. Then when we wake up, we stand, stretch and put on the pants, shirts, socks and shoes waiting for us. But if we're honest, the "getting dressed" process doesn't stop there. After the clothes, we put on the roles we fulfill—parent, sibling, spouse or child, employee or boss. Then we add onto that the intellectual garments of our beliefs and prejudices—our faith, politics, fears and phobias, hopes and wishes. Lastly we look in the mirror and give ourselves a pep talk about who we are in the world, about how things aren't fair and don't come easy, about how you have to be careful out there to make sure no one takes advantage of you, and how anything you or you can do, well, I can do it better. Somehow we manage to put on all those things and squeeze out our front doors to encounter the world each day. It's a lot of baggage to carry around. No wonder we're tired at the end of the day.

In "Annie Get Your Gun," when Annie and Frank argue over who can sing better or shoot better, the real contest has nothing to do with singing or shooting. The real contest is which of them is perceived to be better in the eyes of the other. Like vain sumo wrestlers, they are simply trying to bump the other one out of the ring and declare themselves the champion of the world. In a similar way, in John 9, we have a clash between religious leaders and an unnamed blind man. When the man suddenly regains his sight, his story clashes with the Pharisees' story—it challenges the Pharisees' perception of how the world works, the prejudices they carry around, and their pride about being the ultimate authorities on these matters. So they accost the man with his newly regained sight. They don't challenge the substance of the matter—no one doubts he can now see; they only challenge the perception, the explanation of how he was healed. And they do so with attitude, arguing, "Who are you to teach us?"

In many ways, that's the crux of the problem. When the Pharisees got dressed that morning, they put on their clothes and robes and privilege and status and lastly, their pride—a pride that in this case said "No ex-beggar blind man is going to teach me anything today." And before any of us are tempted to smirk at the Pharisee's behavior, our dress code is often just the same as theirs; we too step out in the world with the attitude of "You are not the boss of me." We know we shouldn't do this, put on airs and be so sensitive, but it happens to us all.

The story is told about how in the late 1700s, a man dressed like a farmer walked into Baltimore's largest hotel and was refused a room because his appearance would discredit the inn's reputation. So the man left. Later that evening, the innkeeper discovered he had turned away Thomas Jefferson. Immediately he sent a note asking him to return and stay as his guest. Jefferson's reply was that

while he valued the manager's good intentions in this offer, if he has no place for a dirty American farmer, he has none for the Vice President of the United States.

The writer G.K. Chesterton has said, "There may be a valid reason for turning a beggar away from your door, but pretending to know all the stories he may have shared with you is pure nonsense...Egoism never leads to knowledge."¹ And a former professor at Harvard, George Herbert Palmer once said, "I am defeated, and know it, if I meet any human being from whom I find myself unable to learn anything."

Two thousand years ago, those Pharisees (bless their souls) were walking around in their robes and status and pride and perfectionism when all of that was challenged—first by the report of a healing that had occurred on the Sabbath and second by the recipient of that healing, who had been a blind man, an outcast, damaged goods in the marketplace of life. Did this formerly blind man have an important story to tell? Yes he did. Likewise, we get up and put on our clothes and status and pride and prejudice, and each day we are challenged. Do we have something to learn from every person we meet, young and old, rich and poor, stranger and friend? Yes we do. Do we have something to learn from minimum wage employees behind Panera's counters or in Giant Eagle checkout lines? Yes we do. Do we have something to learn from migrant workers, from ex-cons, from Pitt students or Shuman Juvenile Detention or Western Psych residents? Yes we do. Do we have something to learn from white males in Butler County as they tell their own stories about regulations affecting their livelihood on farms and the loss of real jobs in their small towns needed to keep their kids nearby? Yes we do. Do we have something to learn from women objectified daily or forced to multi-task and cobble together careers unfairly? Yes we do.

The list goes on with stories about race, addiction, divorce, depression. Just because I didn't name your category doesn't mean your story isn't important. It's not a contest. In particular, on this day it's about a bible story that forces itself into our story whenever we say the unfaithful phrase "You can't teach me a thing." Remember last week, when we looked at the story of the Samaritan Woman who met Jesus at the well (John 4)—how they talked and her eyes were opened and she left her jar behind to run back to the village and tell the others what she now saw clearly about this Jesus being the Messiah? Well, in John 9 the long argument between the Pharisees and the blind man's friends, the blind man's family, and the blind-but-now-I-see man himself only reminds us of how quickly we complicate things because of our pride, insecurity and vanity.

The thing to hold onto is what happened earlier in this story—when Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with his saliva and rubbed the mud on the man's eyes and said, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." Now, don't try this at home. This is a sign from God, not a home remedy. By any standard it is messy; it is counter-intuitive; it's head-scratching, unsettling, unusual and unexpected.

Yet break it down into its parts. A blind man heard—not saw, but heard the call of Jesus. A touch of grace came to him—unmerited, undeserved. Then he was sent into the world—first to wash and then to tell his story to any who asked. Now it's true: Once he told his story, arguments arose. People tried to dissuade the man and challenge what he knew to be true. They even cast him out, trying to put him back on the margins from whence he'd come. But the one who'd touched his eyes and sent him to the waters of Siloam is the same one who earlier said, *"Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away"* (John 6:37). The one who was lost has been found, the one born blind can now see, and never more need he wonder where he fits in this wide world of God's making and Christ's saving.

What clothes do you lay out for yourself that you put on as you begin each new day? What roles and responsibilities, prejudices and fears do you carry with you—armor against a dangerous world, layers against the slings and arrows of other's outrageous words? Isn't it exhausting keeping your guard up all the time—making sure others don't see weakness in our eyes or try to insist their story must be added to our story? Instead of all that, try starting over guided by John 9. Before you get out of bed, lie still for a moment. With closed eyes, simply breathe and be aware of your body and give thanks for the gift of life. With eyes still shut, remind yourself to listen today—to believe that you will hear the voice of Christ and it won't come from within your own head but from someone you meet. Then before you get up and put on the day's clothes—and certainly before you put on the baggage and armor and biases and prideful attitudes—remember how the crud on your eyes and in your life has been washed away. Remember that you've been baptized—that water has been poured on you as a sign and seal of God's love. And that you have been sent to tell that story to all you encounter this day. Then get dressed. You'll be surprised how much simpler your fashion choices become and how much lighter are the loads you carry.

The whole business about blindness and sin isn't the main point here. The whole song-and-dance about "Anything you can do I can do better" and "You can't teach me a thing" isn't what needs to be analyzed. All we need to do is hear once more Jesus say, "I am the light of the world" and remember how we've been baptized by a God who loves us and sent us out to tell that story in dialogue and conversation and worship and prayer with everyone we meet. And then our eyes will be opened, our burdens lifted, and we'll see. We'll see.

AMEN

¹ From "On Lying in Bed and Other Essays," quoted in Simon Morris's Life's Solution, p. 329.