

“Jesus: The Unauthorized Version”

John 9:1-41

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“It happened one too many times,” Katherine Schneider begins in her blog written nearly 14 years ago. “My seeing eye dog and I went to church and heard another totally uninspiring homily about John 9, the story of the man born blind. It contained the usual elements: ‘I knew a blind person who was amazing (climbed Mount Everest, was cheerful all the time); wouldn’t it be awful to be blind?... Jesus’ healing of the blind man was miraculous; the Pharisees were blind not to recognize Jesus for who he was; and pray that you never act blind (i.e. insensitive to the world around you).”¹

It’s terrible to admit it but my first reaction, reading Schneider’s pointed and helpful post was, “Oh God, am I about to preach another totally uninspiring homily about John 9?” Normally my self-confidence isn’t quite so fragile, but the Gospel of John wears a preacher down. Jesus reserves his greatest criticisms for those of us in the religious profession. I know John’s smack-talk has historic roots to those first-century Christians angry over being ousted from the synagogue. It’s the reason that leaders in John’s Gospel get lumped into an unsettling category named “the Jews.”² But even so, I think Jesus has a problem with religious leaders. He thinks that we can be especially arrogant. I know it was shocking to me, too. He thinks that religious leaders worry more about maintaining control more than we actually promote the wellbeing of others. As if we think it’s our job to manage God for everyone else.

In defense of my profession it’s very difficult not to assume that my job is to manage God for you. Help you interpret the Scripture or your life through my professional experience. Lead the way. To take interesting, odd, and challenging testimony about God and try to make it safe for everybody else. Take the mystery of this complex, odd character we call God and repackage her into bite-sized, understandable nuggets that you can digest to fuel you through the week.

The trouble with that approach is that God is, well, odd, and strange, and surprising, and free, not easily repackaged. Take the man in this text. He is somehow changed by an encounter with Jesus outside the normal channels. With a lump of mud. We don’t know how Jesus did it. We don’t know why Jesus did it. His transformation is so unexpected that people around him can’t even acknowledge it.

¹ Katherine Schneider, “The Man Born Blind,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, <http://www.americamagazine.org/issue/453/article/man-born-blind>

² I often substitute “the religious authorities” for “the Jews” because in most places I judge it more accurate to the context of the intent of John’s Gospel as written as well as the way I believe that texts speaks to the church today. Namely, as a critique of religious authority, not as a critique of Jewish people or of Judaism. However, the text has clearly been used as fuel for a greater anti-Semitism lending some to belief that “religious authorities” dodges the deeper question of how the Church can hear good news out of such a text.

The town folk aren't certain the man who now has visual sight is the same person. Maybe they've reduced him to his disability for so long that's all they ever saw – not the man who was born blind, but “the blind guy.” The religious authorities are so unaccustomed to this kind of transformation they take the man's good fortune as bad news. Even his parents kind of throw him under the bus. “He is of age, ask him [how we was healed],” they say. Because who can really accept that God is present and active in this?

One of the reasons we have trouble accepting it is that there are just too many parts of this healing that don't make sense. Why now? Why him and not others? And what's this theology about being born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him? That sounds offensive. How about the antiquated way this text views people with disabilities? Some see blindness as connected to sin. Jesus seems to use it as a metaphor for ignorance which isn't much better. We can't walk away from this text with a nice, clean understanding of when and how God acts, not consistently anyway. With all the pitfalls and problems of this text it would be safer just to avoid it, or explain its deficiencies. Put it to the side.

If I'm honest that's kind of the way I deal with stories from people who testify to their encounters with Jesus. An alcoholic tells me his story of Jesus miraculously entering his life one day leading him to suddenly stop drinking and my first thought is, “I wonder what *really* happened. You know, psychologically.” A mother tells me how she had written off ideas of Jesus determined not to expose her children to religion until her kid dragged her into a church one day saying, “Please, mom. I want to have the opportunity to pray to God and know Jesus.” And part of me can't help but wonder, “kid has some problems.” Or a skeptic who's kind of more Unitarian than anything else goes into a coma and almost dies where Jesus comes to meet her and I'm like, “now what kind of drugs did you say they had you on?” Or, I leave meeting in the church where someone argues that we shouldn't worry so much about accommodating people with disabilities since we don't have that many here at Brown, only to walk into the sanctuary next door to find a first-time visitor who is blind looking to meet me and I think to myself, “has to be a coincidence because the alternative is well, unbelievable.”

That's the way we cerebral-type Christians deal with people who tell us Jesus changed them. We come up with alternative explanations. Because God should not act in ways that defy our understanding. God should not act in ways that don't fit our clean theological explanations. Unless of course it happens to you. Unless you're the alcoholic who hasn't taken the drink for 20 years because Jesus came to see you. Or you're the mom who's asking yourself, how did Jesus ever come to start messing with me? Or you're the used-to-be-Unitarian that Jesus visited in light and let you know it was going to be alright. Or you're the pastor walking through the church confident that you have everything under control and here comes Jesus turning everything upside down.

Presbyterians, of course, detest these kinds of stories for a lot of the right reasons. We believe science is perfectly compatible with faith. Prayer is not a substitute for medicine. God can come to us in perfectly reasonable, rational ways. We detest superstition. We endorse evolutionary science, and hospitals, and schools. But we also can't stand losing control. It's why we follow books of order as

if they will save us, or squeeze scripture through our theological strainers to purify its troubling parts, or slow every decision down to a crawl until every last bit of risk has been wrung out of it. It's why we've got paper bulletins so everyone can know exactly what's going to happen next. Wouldn't want the pastor leaving the script. Why we sit in the same seats and not at the front. Expect to sing a hymn that we know. Don't let Jesus on up in here messing with our singing. We want God to stay where we put him. It's like Will Willimon said one time in a sermon: "why do Presbyterians need a Book of Order? It would take a stick of dynamite, or Pentecost, to disorder most Presbyterian congregations."³

But note that people who don't want Jesus disrupting order are mostly people who like the way things are ordered. Those of us who like the way things have settled out for us. Those of us who like the power that we have attained. Those of us who clean to the past more than we cling to God.

Jesus has other ideas. Which is good news for anyone who's been typecast for so long that even people who call themselves family can't imagine a different life for him. It's good news for a city that has accepted its decline as inevitable. It's good news for a people who seem to have all but given up on dreams of equality and peace. Jesus shows up and disrupts everything. Jesus remakes people whether we're willing to acknowledge it or not.

Which is what happens to this man born blind. He gets remade. And I know that testimony causes all kinds of interpretive problems. Did this man really ever say he wanted to be healed of his blindness? And what about all the other people who need healing? Why doesn't Jesus come to them? And how are we to account for miracles in a post-modern context? I'm the first to know it causes more problems than it solves – I'm a religious professional, after all. I've been trained to spot these theological problems. But here's what I've resolved to do as the preacher who sometimes lapses into thinking that it's my job to dictate where and how God shows up: let the person who's been remade by Jesus speak for herself. Let the man born blind testify to where God is in his blindness. Let the alcoholic saved by Jesus articulate how God showed up for him. Let the mother share where God did or didn't show up for her. Let the person brought back from the dead share her own experience. And by all means, let God be God for the sake of a world that has suffered too long under our lack of imagination, our failure to believe in the possibility of transformation, our love affair with the status quo.

Karl Barth said one time that "Christians go to church to make their last stand against God."⁴ I wonder how many of us arrive with that as our goal. And then we find out that the Christian faith is not first what you decide about Jesus – it's what Jesus does to you.

Some of you know Sean Closkey the President of the nonprofit reinvestment corporation that manages BUILD's redevelopment in the Oliver community. Sean is a master at knowing not just how to build low-income housing, but how to rebuild a

³ <http://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/pentecost/dulling-down-pentecost-11547307.html>

⁴ I thank Will Willimon both for the Karl Barth quote and for the comment about Christianity being about what Jesus "does to you." Unfortunately, I can't remember where I heard him quote Barth or make this pithy comment.

market that has completely collapsed and do it under the leadership of longtime residents not against them. Sean is one of the smartest people I know. He starts talking numbers and I have to ask him to slow down and repeat. But a lot of you probably don't know that Sean used to work on Wall Street. He went there out of college determined to rake in as much dough as possible. Sean asked me one time, "Do you believe in conversions?" "Of course not," I said. I'm a Presbyterian. "Well that's what happened to me. Jesus came to me so I looked on a map and found what I thought was one of the poorest communities on the east coast – Camden, NJ. And I moved there and never looked back. Jesus saved me from a dull and boring life."

I'm sure there is an alternative explanation to what happened to Sean. Some way to make his explanation a lot more safe and reasonable. It wouldn't be hard for me to come up with one – I'm a religious professional after all. But I'd rather just give thanks instead.

So I'll leave you with a choice of questions – when was the last time that God interrupted your life and what happened? Or, what is one area of your life outside of your control where you hope for God to show up?