

“No Limits on Love”
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John 9:1-41
San Dimas Community Church, UCC

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No doubt you've noticed that John's lectionary texts are lengthy, intricately woven stories that needed to be heard by John's congregation and heard by us today. The first 12 verses tell about Jesus healing a blind man. The disciples ask Jesus an interesting question about the blind man: "Who sinned? The man or his parents?" Jesus says, "neither."

In Jesus' culture being sick or deformed was thought to be because the person had sinned; so Jesus makes a radical statement by saying sin had nothing to do with this man's blindness. So what did Jesus think sin was? Is it what we think of as sin? Often we concentrate on avoiding what we might call "little sins." These would be single acts of wrong doing; these "little sins" make a difference. If you tell a little lie, it's easier to keep telling lies. If you cheat a little (especially without consequences) it's easier to cheat again. "Little sins" are important not to do.

Yet in Jesus ministry he spends more time preaching about "big sin" and "big sin" is **estrangement from God and all that God loves**; "big sin" is **separation** from all God's creation; "big sin" is a breakdown in relationships. It may result from a culmination of "little sins" or it may result from structures of society that have arisen because of society's greed or not seeing what God wants us to see. "Big sin" is blindness to God's vision for creation!

On my bed is a quilt that I bought at a church auction some years ago. The quilt was made by a woman who had nearly lost her sight, but through the miracle of modern medicine, her sight was restored. The quilt was her expression of gratitude to God for being almost blind but now able to see. It is unusual for a person to see again AFTER they are blind. Yet, the blind man in John's text does just that, verse 25 says: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

You're probably wondering why we didn't sing *Amazing Grace* this morning. Well, we're going to. Let's sing it instead of what's printed as the hymn before communion; the words will be on the slides. About a year ago the movie *Amazing Grace* came to the big screen. This movie tells the story of the British struggle to ban slavery. Slavery had been critical to the British Empire's rise to power; without slavery the empire would have been economically impossible. But although slavery existed, there were people who were not blinded to the sin of slavery. William Wilberforce was one in Parliament who passionately spoke out against it. But his passion to abolish slavery is very long and hard-fought.

Wilberforce is mentored by an old preacher named John Newton, the Newton who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace* after relinquishing his own participation in the slave traffic. One day Wilberforce comes to visit the old preacher, who is now completely blind. Newton is dictating to his secretary the accounts of the horror of the slave traffic. He tells Wilberforce that these accounts are his confessional. He says that only now after making this confession, though he is completely blind, he now sees.

It is this blindness of not seeing the sin around us, ignoring injustice, putting economy over righteousness that Jesus holds up as the gold standard of sight both the Pharisees of his time as well as us living today.

We are called to be sighted with understanding and compassion, with "no limits on love." Sight is theological INSight. Sight leads to salvation. Sight abolishes sin. Remembering that "big sin" for Jesus was estrangement and separation from all that God, the creator, loves, salvation IS, to use the theologian Tillich's words: **"The union of the separated and estranged."**

Now think back to John's community hearing this story. Verses 1-12 tell the healing story. Verses 13-41 tell the story of the blind man being interrogated by the Pharisees. What's going on here? In verse 22 when the parents of the blind man refuse to get involved in their son's defense, it is because **"the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue."** In my Monday morning lectionary discussions with Ed, he told me that this verse references one of 12 benedictions found in ancient texts in Cairo in 1896, which spell out benedictions *against* the Christian heretics. To confess Jesus meant that John's Christian community were to be kicked out of the synagogue! Estranged from the worshipping community! Separated from all that before had given meaning to their lives! Sin, is estrangement and separation; sin can be what we do to ourselves or it can be what others do to us.

But before we start blaming the Jews and buying into anti-semitic rhetoric which has been used to commit some of the worst sins in human history, let's think about how *we today* may separate ourselves from God's beloved community? It has not been that many years ago that slaves set in the balconies of the church if they were allowed in church at all. Mostly they worshipped in secret where they formed stomping circles praising God in muffled tones so as not to be discovered.

Who else do we not see?

The slave trade in Britain was finally defeated when a lawyer found a loophole which made it economically impossible to continue the slave trade. It was not righteousness nor theological INsight that influenced Parliament to abolish slavery; it was the elimination of an economy that required this SIN in the first place.

Today we have an opportunity, a gift, to give to One Great Hour of Sharing, which has for many years provided resources to help the blind see by acts of mercy and works of justice. There are "no limits of God's love;" and through One Great Hour of Sharing we help make visible God's limitless love throughout the world.

As Ed and I talked about the question of "what is Christian love," he reminded me of Reinhold Niebuhr's idea that Christian love is *impossible possibility*. Christian love is the possibility to approximate the love of God which is impossible for us to achieve, therefore, we strive for the *impossible possibility*. And this reminded me of another quote by Niebuhr which encourages me in this endeavor of *impossible possibility*, and I will end with his words:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime, therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone, therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.