

“What Seems Obvious is not Always Obvious”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for Lent Four, March 26, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Annual Meeting Day

Scripture Readings: I Samuel 16:1-13;

John 9:1-12

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It is for me one of the disgusting stories in the Bible. Jesus uses his spittle to make mud and wipe it all over a blind man’s eyes.

Now I am sure that I am not the only kid in the world who had to pass inspection every Sunday before heading to church, but too often I had the spittle treatment – to put right a few hairs once out of place on my head, or make sure the black mark behind my ear (wherever it came from) was not showing above the collar of my white shirt.

I knew Jesus would not tolerate such activity when he was a boy – he would not need to be inspected like this – and then at some point I heard this story: Jesus healing using dirt and spit! Now getting dirty was the anathema of a Sunday activity, and getting slicked down with spit was my worst nightmare. And here Jesus was doing both!

I never worried about the story itself – how did Jesus heal this fellow with such actions? I was too horrified at the materials used to ever ponder the process of the healing that took place.

Now fifty plus years later I probably cannot get away with such a conclusion, sharing my disgust and forgetting about the story, so I must address the issues the story brings to our consciousness.

With regard to this healing: “Is it true?” “Did it really happen?” “How did Jesus actually do it?” I thought there had to be good scholarship which offered conclusions on this event, and how the story did take place in real historical time.

I read Morton Smith’s book again, ***Jesus the Magician***, and learned about the ways that magic was a part of religious experience and understanding in the time of Jesus. He also states that the coming of the Magi to the manger scene was a way of acknowledging that magic (the realm of the Magi), a way to show that Jesus not only was open to new interpretations of the Jewish faith that were so much a part of his formation, but he openly accepted other religious traditions in his remaking of what the faith for the future should be. Interesting idea, I thought.

Then I turned to Bishop John Spong’s book ***Liberating the Gospels***, where he takes a contrary position to Smith – he suggests that we need to read the gospel accounts simply “with Jewish eyes.” In doing so, he goes even further. He released me from the worry of trying to figure out how the healing took place, and the ways that spittle-induced mud could cure a blind man.

Spong argues that the question that works with the story, and all of the stories of Jesus of a miraculous nature, is not “Is it true?” or “Did it really happen?” but rather “What does it mean?”

On that level, it falls in the category of the story of George Washington who cut the cherry tree. According to legend, Washington received a hatchet for his sixth birthday, and went out and tried it on one of his father’s cherry trees, marking it significantly. When confronted by his father, the young Washington responded: “I cannot tell a lie, father – yes, I did cut the cherry tree.”

His father, so delighted at his son’s honesty, hugged him for telling the truth, and felt that honesty was far more valuable than any cherry tree ever could be worth.

This story was embedded in a biography of Washington written by Mason Locke Weems, an itinerant preacher and travelling book seller. Many of the tales of Washington’s childhood in that book are without collaboration, and some have suggested they come from stories of English boys growing up in the century before.

The story of Washington gets more complicated. P. T. Barnum hired a slave named Joyce Heth in 1835 who was presented as being 161 years old and was the wet nurse for Washington when he was a child. Heth died a year later, at the estimated age of 79, but Barnum had made as much as \$1,500 a week with the story of this unassuming slave woman who spouted “facts” that came from Weems biography, and pretended to know the infant Washington.

Of course the cherry tree story lives on in American culture. It got transformed during the Presidency of Jimmy Carter where the story went around that as a young boy, Jimmy was confronted by his father: “Jimmy, did you cut down that peanut tree?” and Jimmy replied: “Father, I cannot tell a lie – maybe I did, and maybe I didn’t.”

The story of Washington underlies his honesty and integrity; the story of Carter was a way to display what people deemed to be indecision and uncertainty (never mind that peanuts do not grow on trees in the first place).

So what meaning does the story of the blind man being cured give to the gospel stories?

When miracles and amazing events happen in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) they usually are representative of the power of God in the lives of people. Jesus uses such events to tell people: “God is in your presence at this very moment” (he used the term “The Kingdom of God is upon you” but I think a more generic translation covers what Jesus ultimately meant).

In John’s gospel, such miracles are deemed to be “signs” of the very divine power and presence of Jesus. One set of gospels points us to God; the Gospel of John wants us to point all that takes place to Jesus, for by the time this gospel was written, the church had determined that Jesus was the Messiah, and they wanted to make sure that was clear to anyone who heard their message.

But the story of the blind man had more than a curiosity to it. It became the essential story for baptism – the opening of one’s eyes to let in the light of God, and the washing at the pool of Siloam, a reminder of the power of water to cleanse and renew.

So what is the meaning of the story of the healing of the man born blind? It is hard, even impossible, to be people of faith if our eyes are closed and we do not let in the light of God. It is hard, even impossible, to be people of faith if we are not willing to be cleansed and renewed by the waters that are pure and wholesome.

We can say we have known what to do and how to live right from the time of our birth, but we all have moments of insight, clarity, and renewal that shape us for the new chapter in our lives.

That is what this story tells us, that is, if we have ears to hear, and eyes to see.