

Providence Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. David Pettit

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John 9 - "Encountering Christ: Renewing Our Senses"

We tend to speak about senses as both literal and figurative. I was on a Zoom meeting last week, and even after three years of such meetings, someone was inevitably muted and their screen not shared and asked if others could see or hear them. He wasn't being metaphorical. He meant actually seeing and hearing. We want to see. We want to hear. But many of us are aware of diminishing senses through age or abuse of our bodies. It gets harder to see, many of us relying on thicker or more sophisticated prescription lenses over time or even the assistance of others to read a label for us or a letter. It gets harder to hear, and we test out just how high the numbers go on the TV volume. Evan Totten was complaining of dulled tastebuds on Thursday morning as explanation for why he was dumping the bottle of hot sauce on his breakfast. I tend to have persistent sinus issues, and I'm fairly certain the house could be half consumed with flame before I smelled anything wrong.

So, we are mindful of our senses and how it gets harder. But we also speak of our senses figuratively. I might ask, for example, "do you see what I mean?" It is a common expression. On a literal level, it makes no sense. But you likely know what I mean if I use that expression. What I mean is, do you understand, or are you getting what I'm trying to communicate or explain? If I think you are being dense or not understanding what I'm trying to say, I may ask, "Are you deaf?!" But I don't mean literally deaf, but just that you do not understand what I'm trying to communicate, and clearly, it is your fault.

What is at stake on both levels, the literal and the figurative, is our ability to receive input, to receive and respond to information or stimulation. Senses, and the ability to understand or comprehend, both allow us to take in what is around us. They enable us to receive essential information that, many times, is key to interacting with others and being a part of what is going on. That is the difficult part of our senses weakening: we may feel more isolated. We are unable to participate, unable to hear the conversation, unable to see what everybody else is laughing at.

Our scripture this morning features two senses in particular: sight and hearing. We could add touch, I suppose, in that Jesus heals the man through touch, placing the mud physically on his eyes. But it is sight and hearing, or the ability to listen to what is being said; these two senses feature prominently.

The man Jesus heals was blind from birth. He came to know the world and to navigate the world without the ability to see, relying more heavily on his other senses. What caught my attention in this story is that I don't hear grandiose declarations from the man, as if he wasn't somebody before or what completely incapable and now he is. He testifies that he was blind and now sees, but he doesn't go dancing in the streets. You see, people come to function and find their sense of self, even if in ways different than most of us able-bodied folks.

The emphasis seems to be on other aspects of change. The stigma that somebody's sinfulness must have caused this is now lifted potentially. The social exclusion and inability to participate are now lifted. The big implication is that Jesus is more than your average teacher, and this is perhaps the most disruptive aspect. However, despite these potential effects, the Pharisees still demean him as sinful from birth. And his voice still does not carry. They don't hear him or acknowledge what he sees or understands.

The image in the bulletin comes from an article entitled "What People Cured of Blindness See." The article asserts that what sighted people sometimes assume is that if someone comes to gain sight, they will see just as we see, that we all see the same things in the same way with the same color and lighting. Do people healed see like you or I? I think of some of you who have had cataracts removed and the realization of what your sight had become.

I have no idea what this man saw or how clearly or brightly. Or if he could even recognize things through sight, having known the world through other senses like hearing and touch. But what is clear is that none of the characters featured in the story can agree on what is happening. They don't see the same way, both literally and figuratively. They can't agree on reality. What did Jesus do? Who even is this person? In fact, some now even question that this was the man they knew to be blind in the first place; it must have been someone else, or perhaps he never was blind at all. The able-bodied people who have had sight all along seem unsure if they can say what has been true at all up to this point.

In the ensuing debate and back and forth, the ability to hear or to listen is utterly lacking. The Pharisees ask questions but don't seem to compute the answers. So, they ask the same question again to the point that the guy is scratching his head, saying, "why do you keep asking the same questions?" He starts to feel like he is stuck in a committee meeting that will not end and where they cannot make any progress, or in an argument about politics where everyone is just regurgitating and not open to each other. The conversation starts to feel a little maddening, doesn't

it? And being that the story goes on for forty-one verses, we feel the familiar fatigue from being in a conversation where no one is actually listening.

What is at stake, as I suggested earlier, is our ability to receive input. To gain information and come to new understanding, experience, and response. For what is central in this story is not just the man's new ability to see but the revelation of who Jesus is through performing such signs and miracles. What is at stake is the ability to perceive what God is doing amongst them. What is at stake is the ability to encounter Jesus, learn something about him, and find oneself in relationship with him.

The community members do not conceive of someone going from blindness to sight, or they don't want to acknowledge that Jesus has this power, so they propose it is somebody else, unable to acknowledge this man's story and experience with Christ. They choose to speak for him rather than hear him. The Pharisees have preconceived notions and frameworks that prevent them from receiving the information the man is trying to convey. They will not accept that someone who is from God would heal on the Sabbath; they will not accept such an infraction on any basis. Others, among them, say that Jesus must be from God to do this. Then they decide the man was never really blind at all.

They can all see, on a literal level. They can all hear. But they cannot receive and process what the man is trying to say. Ironically, as everyone struggles to see and hear, the man who no one can understand or agree concerning, speaks with clarity. He does not presume more than he knows. He is willing to receive what he has not yet comprehended. To those that were debating among themselves whether he was the man born blind, or whether he was ever blind, he states simply, "I am the man."

When asked how his eyes were opened, he answers: "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."

When asked where Jesus is, he says, "I do not know."

When asked again how his eyes were opened, he answers: "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."

When the Pharisees insist Jesus must be a sinner and ask him to agree, he responds: "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

When asked again what Jesus did. “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again?”

In the end of the story, Jesus finds him. And Jesus asks him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” To which the man replies, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” The Son of Man is a messianic title, referring to the notion of one God would send at some point to rescue or redeem God’s people, one who, as it was rumored and anticipated, might have the power to heal and perform miracles. So, the man, not stating more than he knows, is open, having received the healing, having regained sight is now open to encountering Christ. And when Jesus says, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he,” his response is: “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

What stands out about this man is his ability to speak plainly about new realities and experiences. He receives new input for that is what our senses are supposed to do. He is able to receive touch, receive healing, to receive new insight, new change, new realizations about what God is doing. Moreso, He can adapt--to mold himself to it and to respond. The reason I chose our poem this morning is for that sense of openness and the ability to perceive and reconceive, rather than accept certain things and block out others according to our assumptions or preferences.

What does it do to a conversation when we resist assumptions, generalizations, talking points, etc.? What does it do to a conversation when we speak plainly and honestly in simple, unassuming language, And when we can just accept what someone else is saying without reacting or needing it to fit our assumptions? We might be able to encounter each other, to connect in a new way. And what if we tried such a thing in our relationship to Christ, our relationship to God? To speak plainly, to be open, to renew our ability to hear and see and to respond.

So, in the clamor of repeated questions and what feels like this frantic energy and everybody talking over each other, the man who was born blind is the only one open to perceive something new about God and about Jesus. He is the one willing to adapt and move with it, even though he lacks all the answers, even though he does not understand and know many things. The others are resistant and cannot take in this new input, resorting to possible explanations that keep their assumptions intact. It seems that this encounter with a man born blind exposes their own dull senses: their inability to see and perceive, their inability to listen to a person speaking plainly, their inability to understand, the hard-heartedness that keeps them from believing and worshipping.

I close with an invitation to find yourself in the story. To interpret and consider from inside the story. Who do you relate to or find compelling in the story right now? Whose place or perspective in the story do you connect with? And as you put yourself into that character, what do you like or not like about being this person in the story? Or what frustrations or opportunities does this bring to light for you?

If you want to explore this more, we'll pick this up on Tuesday morning with coffee and conversation.

In the meantime, I pray that God might renew our senses. On a literal level would be nice. But on a figurative level, it feels kind of crucial, crucial to connecting and moving with God, to listening and responding to each other. May God lead us out of our isolation with renewed senses and openness.

And all God's people said...

## John 9

### *A Man Born Blind Receives Sight*

9 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. <sup>4</sup> We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. <sup>5</sup> As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” <sup>6</sup> When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, <sup>7</sup> saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. <sup>8</sup> The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” <sup>9</sup> Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” <sup>10</sup> But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” <sup>11</sup> He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” <sup>12</sup> They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

### *The Pharisees Investigate the Healing*

<sup>13</sup> They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. <sup>14</sup> Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. <sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” <sup>16</sup> Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. <sup>17</sup> So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”

<sup>18</sup> The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight <sup>19</sup> and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” <sup>20</sup> His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; <sup>21</sup> but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” <sup>22</sup> His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. <sup>23</sup> Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

<sup>24</sup> So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” <sup>25</sup> He answered, “I

do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”<sup>26</sup> They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”<sup>27</sup> He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?”<sup>28</sup> Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.”<sup>29</sup> We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”<sup>30</sup> The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.”<sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.<sup>32</sup> Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.<sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”<sup>34</sup> They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

### *Spiritual Blindness*

<sup>35</sup> Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”<sup>36</sup> He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”<sup>37</sup> Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.”<sup>38</sup> He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.<sup>39</sup> Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.”<sup>40</sup> Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”<sup>41</sup> Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.