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John 9:1-41
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The Sort of Thing God Would Do

The movie *Hoosiers* came out in 1987. I know for some of you that is soooo last century, and for others that is soooo before you were born. I think *Hoosiers* is the greatest sports movie of all time. It was even filmed in color. At one point in the movie, the small-town Indiana high school basketball coach, Norman Dale, played by Gene Hackman, is trying to impress the school's English teacher, Myra Fleener, played by Barbara Hershey. "Why haven't you ever left this place?" says the flirtatious Hackman. Hershey pauses: "Because nothing ever changes around here. Nothing ever changes and that makes me feel real secure, real good inside." The vernacular of change has gained momentum of late, in politics, in corporate America, in education. In the midst of change, there are many like the Barbara Hershey character who long for stability and security. Today's gospel lesson is a story of how God refuses to allow people to stay the same, and how the change that God brings about in individuals can be so difficult for others to receive.

The story of Jesus healing the blind man at Siloam takes place in five scenes. In the first scene Jesus heals the blind man. In the second scene the neighbors of the blind man wonder aloud what happened and if this is the same blind boy who grew up around the block. In the third scene the Pharisees get involved, and they drag the parents into the fray, and both Pharisees and parents interrogate the blind man about his identity and his healing. In scene four the Pharisees argue with Jesus about sin, the Sabbath, and about the identity of Jesus himself. And in the final scene, the blind man believes in the son of God, and the Pharisees go away wondering who is really blind.

John is picking up on the narrative of creation and liberation that flows through the whole of the Old Testament. In this one blind man, we see the story of all of humanity, created, redeemed, and commissioned to take part in the saving work of God. Jesus heals him by reaching into the dust of the earth, making mud with his spit, touching him, and spreading the substance over his eyes. This is an echo of the first chapter of Genesis when God speaks creation into existence and then forms humanity out of the dust of the earth, blowing breath into human bodies, the same dust that God in Christ now uses on the blind man's eyes. Before the phrase became popular with suburban thirteen year olds on the playground, a freshly healed blind man in the dusty streets outside Jerusalem cried, "I am the man." Seven times, the blind man says, "I am the man." These three letters, these two words, "I am," signal that this is a story about God. "I am," are the words that Moses heard speaking to him from the burning bush, words that are uttered 42 other times in the Old Testament. Jesus speaks the words "I am" seven times in succession near the end of John's Gospel. This is a story about God, the great "I am." In other words, the blind man is saying, "I am a new Adam. I represent what God is doing in creation, in liberation and redemption. I am a child of the living God, formed

from the dust of the earth and redeemed in the life of Jesus.” “I am the man,” says the one born blind.

After Jesus heals the blind man with dust and spit, he sends him to wash in the pool of Siloam, and this is not the standard Jerusalem community swimming pool. This is a special pool, for the word Siloam means “sent.” And not, scent as in perfume, but sent as in “go.” Jesus commands the man to bathe himself clean in the water of sent, in the water of sending. This is not only a story of creation, this is a story of God in Christ letting the oppressed go free in baptism. The man is baptized in the waters of Siloam, and when one is baptized, their core identity is affirmed. The blind man is washed in waters that send him, that send him into the world with a new vision, with eyes to see and ears to hear, the blind man has been baptized, and baptism is always a sending into the world to represent God, even when no one understands.

Imagine for a moment what this must be like for him. He has been blind all of his life, and blindness in those days amounted to a life-sentence as a charity case, constantly dependent on the generosity and pity of others for everything, food, water, a place to sleep. He wouldn't have had a job because there was no job he could do. He had nothing to offer, he couldn't see, he couldn't pick up a trade, there was no such thing as brail, there was no Anne Sullivan to teach him to be a first century Helen Keller, no service dog to guide and protect him. He was supposed to take care of his parents in their old age, and instead they would take care of him until their deaths and then maybe he'd beg, or be taken in by another relative. Imagine this man, little sense of self, his blindness the only thing that others saw about him, and worst of all the assumption that either the blindness was his fault, some personal sin he had committed, or his parents fault, some structural flaw in the genetic lines that amounted to sin. And isn't that the classic way sin is interpreted in our day. For those on the right sin is all about personal responsibility, it's about individual moral decision making – thus the blind man must have done something, it was his own fault, and his problem. And for those on the left, it's all about the systems and structures that hold us in bondage – it's genetic; he's a victim. And Jesus says it's neither; both are wrong. The man's blindness is a mystery, it defies easy categories. Jesus is more interested in redeeming than explaining. For the man, from the moment he was born blind his life direction was set, no changing course. And now he is touched, washed, healed, amazing grace, he was blind and now he sees. Imagine the story he could tell if only somebody would listen to him.

We don't know what he does first with his new-found sight. Maybe he shouts from the nearest mountain top. Maybe he is stunned by his reflection in the water as he sees his face for the first time. Does he have brown hair or black, green eyes or blue? Perhaps he runs from house to house, staring into the faces of his loved ones, gawking at the hands of those who cooked his meals and held him close. Perhaps he corners his friends and goes on at length about the beauty of the sunset, the color of the flowers, the golden sand of the desert. Seeing for the first time he is like Adam in the garden at the dawn of a new creation, the whole world abuzz with potential and the melodious harmony of sight and sound. No longer does he sit in darkness. The light of the world has come into his life and the future is an endless expanse of possibility.

And then, all his passion, wonder, excitement, and potential run straight into the brick wall of cynicism and doubt; he is doused with the cold water of disbelief. Again, and again, and again, and again, and again, five times in all, a series of people cannot

come to terms with who he is and what has happened in his life, first his neighbors, then the Pharisees, then his parents and the Pharisees, then the Pharisees alone, put the man on the defensive. You're not the same person! It can't be you! People born blind are born that way for a reason. Life does not change. The world is the way it is. And again, and again, and again, and again, five times he says, no, it is me, "I am the man." I was blind and now I see; I was touched, I washed and I was sent.

Around campus I often hear students talk about the treadmill, and not the treadmills over in Wilson gym that get so much use, but the constant treadmill of their lives. Usually students say this with a mixture of angst and frustration. The story goes something like this: I never saw my parents, the student says, because they were working day and night to get me into the best pre-school and then grade-school, and by the time middle-school came around, I pretty much had it figure out – get good grades, play lots of sports, find positions that have to do with "being a leader," do well on standardized tests, a fine college is the key to a fine grad school, a fine grad school will find me a smart and dashing life partner, and a great job to boot, so the two of us can work day and night to get our three-year old twins into the best pre-school in town, the one with the pictures of its Ivy League alums up and down the hallway.

It's a familiar story, and it's a cynical story. Oh, we know the story. We know all Duke students are headed to med school or law school or consulting or I-banking . . . except *Teach For America* hired four times more graduates from the Duke class of 2007 than any other organization. You know the story of what college students do on spring break, Daytona, Cancun, Palm Beach, parties, skin, water. They're all the same. Except in a few minutes we'll commission Duke undergrads for mission work in Costa Rica, Belize, Honduras, Uruguay, New Mexico, the Bronx, and Durham this spring break. The neighbors, the parents, the Pharisees, they know this man, they really know him, they know the story, he was blind, that would never change and yet he was baptized and sent, and they are all left scratching their heads, wondering if their eyes are playing tricks on them.

I'll never forget the student who came to me during her junior year at Duke. "I can't explain it she said. I'm a chemistry major, a biology minor, I've been working my tail off for three years so I can go do a PhD in biochemistry, my parents are scrapping about for every penny they've got to send me here, I wasn't even a Christian really until I stepped foot on this campus, and now, despite all that, I believe, deep down in my gut that I'm supposed to go to divinity school, maybe to become a minister. I haven't even taken a religion class yet. My friends think I'm weird, my academic advisor sent me home to, as she said, 'think about it some more,' and my parents, well they now want me to see a therapist. Yet, I know that this is who I am." She was like the blind man in the story. Her eyes had been opened, she had a deepened sense of her self and the purpose of her life, and nobody understood, nobody could believe she was the same person, not her friends, not her professors, not her parents.

"I've been touched," said the blind man, for the fifth time. Oh, you know the story, a black man will never be president of the United States; a woman won't be taken seriously as commander-in-chief. There is no way the environmental crisis will ever be solved. Surely the cold war will go on forever. Things always stay the same; they never change.

And then God blows breath into dust, Jesus takes dirt and spits, eyes are opened, and the Pharisees are left shaking their heads. The story of the blind man is never given a name because he represents all of us. His story is the story of our faith, a story of how God in Christ, the light of the world comes to those who dwell in darkness, to surprise, to intervene, to change the course of our lives, a lamp unto our feet. Not even the tomb of death, or the cold water of sin, can close the way. What's the line that appears once in a while at the bottom of emails: "If you want to make God laugh tell him your ten-year plan."

So the next time the 60 year old woman in your bible study announces she's headed to the PeaceCorp, or your friend leaves the consulting gig on the table and applies to divinity school, don't be surprised. Maybe they've been touched, maybe they're being washed, perhaps they're being sent. Jesus did that once for a lonely blind man on the edge of Jerusalem a long time ago, and who knows . . .

You may be next!