

## *Oil*

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 26, 2017

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Texts: 1 Samuel 16.1-13;  
Psalm 23;  
Ephesians 5.8-14;  
John 9.1-41

I did not grow up in a church that used oil for anointing. The first time I encountered this practice was in seminary at a Presbyterian Church. I remember feeling both skeptical and intrigued. My skepticism had to do with a fear that people would think something magical was happening. And that fear moved in two different directions: I worried that someone coming for prayer who received healing of some kind would think that the oil had magically cured them or that God was like a Genie who would respond if you prayed in the right way but was otherwise uninvolved in your life. I worried even more for those who came for healing and left carrying the very same burden they entered the room with. Would they blame themselves and question whether their faith just wasn't strong enough or that God wasn't trustworthy?

But I was also intrigued. Over the years, I had developed a deep love for our sacraments. Part of the love was the physicality of them. Water touching our skin as a sign and seal that we belong to God. Bread and wine as a means to commune with Jesus. Every time I touch that water I remember the mark that has been made on me as one who belongs to God. When I take in that bread and drink of that cup, I visualize the life force of Jesus - the Holy Spirit - that was moving through his blood and body coming now to move through my blood and body... feeding my spirit even as the bread and cup feed my body. There is nothing magical about the water, the bread, or the wine. These elements of creation have been set aside by the church as a sacred sign and seal of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

I have come to appreciate that sacramental view of life: the ordinary stuff of the earth taken up as powerful reminders of God's presence in the world and in my life. So I was intrigued to see what it would be like to have someone not just pray for me with their words but bless me in a way I could feel with oil that would stay on my body as a symbol of God's healing presence. I wasn't disappointed and I have been participating in these prayers for healing ever since

I want to turn now to the gospel story. Jesus takes up many of the same concerns that I brought with me to my first healing prayer service (although not in same words) and I want to see what gifts he has for us as we come for healing prayer today.

The story starts with a theological discussion. The disciples have learned their theology well. If someone has a problem or an ailment in their body they are considered unclean. Someone has sinned so who was it? Jesus rejects this simplistic cause-and-effect way of seeing the world. He interjects a new way of seeing the situation: it is about God's glory being revealed. This man's blindness has nothing to do with human sin and guilt and everything to do with the way that God's divine presence in all things -- even painful, broken things --- can bring about God's glory.

The healing within this story begins right here in this change of perspective releasing the disciples from this game we all play of assigning blame and making judgments. Certainly, a part of the healing in this story is the recovery of physical sight for the man born blind. There is no question that we seek that kind of healing. It is why we see doctors when we break bones and why we fund research to find cures for the diseases that still elude us. But if the healing that God is after for us had only to do with the relief of the physical suffering that we carry, then this story would be over once the man received his sight. But there is clearly more since that part of the healing happens in verse 7 and the story goes on for 41 verses. The people around the blind man are dumb founded. They are caught up in the probability of it all. The Pharisees are caught up in the legality of it all [it was the Sabbath day after all and healings are considered work]. The man's parents are caught up in the danger of it all.

No one sees the truth that God is among them shedding light and spreading love. Jesus is not a magician and he is not a dangerous criminal with no regard for the law. He is very simply the presence of God and when this presence of God-with-us is experienced, the order of things can change. There are a lot of people who begin to see what they could not see before beyond this man who was born blind. It is in the disciples who begin to see beyond their sin-and-guilt view of the world. It is in the people around this story who begin to see that God is among them and that life lived with this God can defy their expectations. It is in this blind man not just when his eyes are opened in verse 7 but when his heart is opened in verse 38.

Jesus concludes all of these healings with a troubling statement: "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind." He has just finished teaching the disciples that he came to change their views about sin and guilt and here he is talking about judgment!

What if judgment isn't what we generally think it is: a harsh shame-inducing rejection. What if judgment is about putting people in their right mind? The Pharisees think that they see but they see in human terms. They see people breaking laws and they condemn them for it. To judge the Pharisees - to help them come back into their right mind - you first have to cut off the line of vision they are fixated on that isn't serving anyone. It's like trying to point something out to someone on the horizon and they keep looking in the wrong place. As long as they keep looking in the wrong place they will never see what you want them to see. But if you cover their eyes for a moment to make them blind (maybe even turn them around a time or two) to get them to stop looking in the wrong direction and then you open their eyes again and point in the right direction -- finally they see can it.

When I think about prayers for healing I think about healing happening on all these levels. I think about the healing of this man. Not just his physical sight but the opening of his heart. I think about the disciples being challenged to question the theology they inherited. I think about the blind man's parents being encouraged to trust that when God brings freedom

into someone's life this is a good thing even if it rattles the powers that be. And I think about the judgment the Pharisees desperately needed. Not the way we do judgment as harsh rejection - but God's judgment - the kind that can turn us around and correct our vision and put us into our right mind.

And as we come for prayers of healing on all these different levels and many more, we come to receive an anointing with oil.

As we come I encourage us to hold the beautiful words of Psalm 23 in our minds: "You prepare a table before me even in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house - the presence -- of the Lord my whole life long."

Thanks be to God!