

John 9: 1-42
March 26, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Lent

The title of this sermon is, "The danger of certainty."

According to the dictionary the word "certain" denotes something that has been established as absolutely and reliably true for all times and places. Human beings throughout our troubled history on this planet have shown a deep craving for certainty. The world is big and strange. Life is confusing and often overwhelming. We both sense and fear that at the base of things life is way beyond our control.

So what do we do?

We create world views which impose order on the unpredictability of life which help us to make sense of this world. This is in no way a bad thing. We have been given intelligence to explore our lives and to try to make sense of our experience. The best world views do not dictate to us what to believe but give us a framework to seek meaning for our lives. These healthy world views give us a point of view which encourages a basic trust that life is good. Such approaches to life allow help us to accept blessing and suffering in life and to live without fear.

The best illustration for a healthy world view is the human family. Two parents who love each other communicate this love to their children. They encourage their children to explore life; yet they love their children so much that they equip them to live life in the midst of uncertainty and unpredictability. They do this with the poignant realization that the goal is for the children to leave the family home and become adults who can find their way. I propose that

this is an excellent way of understanding of God's desire for his children. God has designed us to have a homing instinct. The job of parents and communities of faith is to help our children recognize and trust that homing instinct. The tragedy of life is that some people never recognize it. The good news is that, in my understanding, everyone makes it home.

Yet there is always a risk that the basic trust in a big and often confusing world will turn in on itself. It will become rigid. It will take the very precepts meant to help us open up to a wider world and turn them into absolutes which close us in and cut us off. When this happens, the word "certainty" takes on a dangerous quality. This "certainty" divides people into *them* and *us*. It separates us into the true believers and the false or utterly misguided believers. We begin to use our "certainty" as the measuring stick for the validity of the beliefs of others. We become "self-righteous"—that is, we use our way of living and believing in the world as the standard for everyone else.

I offer the extended story from John's gospel as an illustration of the danger of certainty. Jesus is walking on the road to Jerusalem. He encounters a man who has been blind since birth. His disciples turn this man into a theological problem. "Who sinned—this man or his parents that he was born blind?"

Notice the assumption. It is not a question of *whether* sin is the cause of blindness. It is a question of *who* is responsible. For generations there has been a lively debate on this subject among the rabbis. On one side stood the statement from the Torah that "the sins of the parents will be visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation. (Deuteronomy 5:8) While God through the prophet Ezekiel cancels this out by saying that no child will be punished for the sins of a parent. (Ez. 18 2 ff.)

Yet it is clear that Jesus recognizes the influence of certainty which has become closed to other interpretations. Thus he replies, "Neither this man or his parents sinned." There is no sin and therefore no punishment. Instead, Jesus says that this condition represents God's opportunity to display his healing power. What an amazing transformation! What had been seen as a sign of condemnation is now an opportunity for glory! Notice that Jesus does not say that God caused the blindness. People are born with limiting conditions of all kinds. But Jesus says that for every human being it is not the limiting condition which is most true about the person. It is the wonderful fact that every limiting condition is the potential scene of the boundless healing mercy of God!

Friends, as most of you know, for more than half of my life I was addicted to alcohol. Since alcoholism ran in my family it could have been said that the sins of the parents were being visited upon me. Yet while I could blame my parents, they never forced alcohol down my throat. I went into that life willingly until I wanted out and could not escape. Then came the day when love confronted me with a choice. Do something about this destructive behavior or continue on and suffer the consequences. At that moment I was led to lay my life before God and ask for help. How it happened I don't know but from that moment on I received a new life. Did I sin? Was it my parents' fault? No. I now look back and recognize that this terrible condition had become the setting for god's glory to be revealed. It is why I can say to you with conviction, if God in Jesus can do that for me he can do it for you no matter what your condition.

So it is that Jesus performs a miracle and restores the man's sight. And that is where the trouble begins. There were many people who were shaken by this healing. They did everything

they could to discredit what had happened. They denied that it had happened. *This must be a trick. He could not really been blind.* They attacked Jesus. *This man is a sinner. He has done this thing on the Sabbath. Since he has violated the Sabbath this act cannot be of God.* They try to get the man to recant his testimony by asking him over and over again what happened. Maybe if they ask him enough times he will make a slip. They go to his parents to undermine his testimony.

It is the sign of the closed system that unhealthy certainty creates that they cannot admit that a miracle has happened. To admit that a miracle has happened is to call into question the reliability of the certainty. Thus they fight to maintain their certainty to the bitter end. They cannot shake the man's testimony. "Give glory to God!" they declare, "We know that this man is a sinner." To this the man born blind has a simple and grace filled response, "I do not know if he is a sinner. What I do know is this: that though I was blind, now I see."

As the rest of the episode plays out one thing becomes clear. When certainty is not humbled by being submitted to the mystery of God, it becomes spiritual blindness. Rather than celebrate the healing, the ones who are so certain deny the miracle and cast out the one who has been touched by the hand of God. What a terrible fate! To be so certain that we don't recognize the presence of God when he is standing right beside us!

Yet there is always a simple remedy. Claim your experience of grace. It does not have to be dramatic. Most signs of grace are so ordinary we miss them. Claim the openings God in Jesus has made in your settled view of life which has awakened you to a wider world. Claim your God given homing instinct and follow it. And become certain, not of the beliefs which you hold, but of the love which, since it has touched your life can touch the life of anyone. Amen.