***Sermon Text for June 2, 2013***

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Exodus 3:1-6, John 9:24-34

“Was blind but now I see…”

This past week we had our 15th annual Bronkema family golf tournament. The four brothers playing against each other in 72 holes of golf over 2 days. The second day in the morning I was up by 5 strokes going into the last hole of the morning. My first shot went into the woods, the second into the marshes, my third and fourth about 10 feet in front of me so I shot a 10 and my brother parred it with a 4 and so he won that round.

This has been happening for the past 15 years and whether one of us has practiced more or less just doesn’t seem to matter when that day comes. Experience shows that the one more mentally fit wins it. So, all of that to say that I don’t have a trophy to present to you this year. We still had a great time.

Scripture provides us today with experiences that happen in the life of two individuals that not only defy logic but also the natural way of life and so are hard to accept and understand by those who have not been a part of it. But that doesn’t make their experiences less real or their applications of their experiences any less important for those who lived through it.

Being able to see God is often in a way that is unconventional even at times contrary to our presuppositions or the current acceptance of people or society. God doesn’t always reveal himself decently and in order and so we are called to be able to understand God in whatever medium he chooses to reveal himself to us. Let’s figure out how to do that today.

**READ**

Seeing God at work and present in an unconventional and unscripted way is fairly routine in my line of work. So when we discussed a week ago at session the topic of communion and the phraseology that I use and that which is in the bulletin it was helpful to hear personal experiences which made us aware of how God was able to reveal himself even if it does go against our written polity or governance. So, the Presbyterian Church is no different from any other main stream denomination and most Christian denominations that state that in order to take communion you must have been baptized at one point in your life. In fact, we are more open than most in that we state that it doesn’t matter in which denomination you have been baptized, because any one works and counts. That is what we mean when we say that we celebrate open communion because anyone baptized, but baptized, can take part in communion.

At session an elder shared that they did not come to know Jesus until they were an adult, and the fact that he took communion and the taking of that communion had a major impact on his life and in his faith journey until he was led to a saving knowledge of Jesus. Even though he had been baptized, he took communion and that taking of communion, that experience, contributed to opening his eyes to know Jesus.

It’s not supposed to work that way, but God worked in spite of our regulations. We pride ourselves on doing things decently and in order, but when things happen that not only fall outside of that category but even contradict our regulations then we become nervous and we scramble to set up other regulations to fit that situation back into the box it belongs.

Early in my ministry I preached a sermon on the Holy Spirit and a man on the front row after the sermon, in the middle of the service, shot up and said: “I want to be baptized,” he was homeless and probably had too much to drink, but I didn’t see how I could fit his request for baptism, as spontaneous as it was, into the church service, into our church government that says that all baptisms have to be approved by session. There was no room for a spontaneous baptism in the church service and I was left wondering…why not?

Today in John we find the religious leaders faced with a very similar situation. A couple of years ago I preached on John 9 these first verses and we find Jesus spitting on mud and applying it to his eyes and then he goes and washes and this man born blind came back able to see again. In the history of the church, we hear today, that had never happened before. He retells his healing to the people in the temple, he told it to the Pharisees, his parents are interrogated , then for a second time the religious leaders call him up to try and figure out and categorize and make sense in their framework of what just happened to this man. It was just too strange.

There was a growing sense of fear in the religious leaders’ mind because what just happened was not at all under their control. It reminds me of the man in Mark 15:15 who had the legion of demons. He was a crazy even violent man to the point that they tried to chain him to a rock and he would break the chains. But he was able to live without being bothered by the people because he wouldn’t bother the people. No one paid him much attention…until Jesus heals him. After Jesus heals him the verse states that there he was, clothed and in his right mind, but they were afraid of this man.

The religious leaders were more comfortable when the man had the demons in him, or in this case when the man was blind, because then he was categorized, he wasn’t one of them, they could keep him at arms length. But now that he is healed not only do they not know where Jesus is from, but it certainly did not fit into the preconceived image of who God is and how God works. This goes well beyond the parameters and God established those parameters for a reason, or did he?

Their attempt in verse 24 is to categorize Jesus as a sinner because he healed him on the Sabbath. My experience is that he made me see again, whether he is a sinner or not, that’s up to you church people to decide, but how can you argue with the fact that I was blind but now I see and it is this man who made me see. As Nicodemus says in John 3:2, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these sings that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Another way of saying it is, my learned faith teaches me that you are a sinner because you heal on the Sabbath, you serve communion to the unbaptized, you baptized without approval, but my experiential faith, the faith that I learned through living, has made me see and I am blind no more.

How much room do we leave for our experience to teach us lessons that may conflict with what we know as the truth in our religious culture? It would seem here that Jesus is a sinner because he broke the Sabbath but the experience of the blind man taught him differently.

Moses in our Exodus Scripture saw God in the burning bush and he was afraid so he covered his eyes because he had been taught that if we look at God we die. But over time he learned from experience. We read in Exodus 33:11 that he spoke to God face to face as one would speak to a friend.

We also know that over time our inexperience teaches us to see dimly but then, in I Corinthians 13 it tells us, we shall see face to face. The experiences that this church has shared over these past 180 years has left a lasting legacy. Even the most recent history has taught lessons that shape how we interact with each other and which paths might be better untrod even if our desire for truth pushes toward them. Our experience tells us not now, there is a reason and a time for all things and now it is a season of seeing, not calling others blind.

There is an ongoing exchange at the end of 9 where the religious leaders ask Jesus if they are blind. Only, Jesus says, if your experience has been so shallow that you have never discovered times when you were convinced you were right, only to be proven wrong…and you didn’t accept it. A church cannot afford a theology of paranoia that gives nobody the benefit of the doubt. A church with an enemies list is fraught with peril and that should never be our style. I don’t like lists of who is in and who is out anyway because it only creates pain and confusion.

Verse 34 we find that the church didn’t know what to do with this man who openly professed a personal relationship with an obvious sinner, so they kicked him out. His parent basically disowned him because they knew that any association with their son meant an association with Jesus and any association with Jesus according to verse 22 meant that you would be given the label of spiritually blind and no longer welcome in the synagogue.

The fine line that this Scripture teaches us to walk is to have room for those with different experiences that has taught them lessons that are different from what our sensibilities teach us without giving up all things institutional. That’s a hard line to walk on because it is always changing and shifting.

Did you see the front page of the Advertiser? We continue to be driven as a community that welcomes the blind who have been touched by sinners. The question that has to be continually on our hearts is that expressed by Nicodemus in John 3:2 when he states: “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs and miracles that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Our sight has been near sighted to the point where we are not able to see God at work unless it falls within the parameters that we have set in which God can work. But John and Moses both teach us today that being a disciple is fraught with the unexpected happening on a daily basis.

When Jesus gave sight to the blind man the statement he was making was that general models, such as love they neighbor, might be more important than rules. Giving sight to the blind is more important than missing that opportunity because it is the Sabbath. But rules are important too.

My prayer for us today, and if last week was black and white today we are definitely in the hazy greys, is that we would be open to sight being given to all even in the most unorthodox way we can imagine. All the while recognizing that the structure which we have just might be the best one we can come up with, with God’s help. Amen.