

Cornel Barnett
 Redwoods Presbyterian Church
 Larkspur, California
 March 30, 2014

John 9:1-41
 "The Tempter Returns to No Avail"

The gospel text today is as long as the one last week. Both are lectionary passages and they hold together much better in the long form than if I cut them.

This Lent we have looked at a work of art at the beginning of each sermon. The artist of today's work is 20th century Japanese printmaker, Sadao Watanabe, who was famous for his biblical prints rendered in the *mingei* (folk art) tradition of Japan. Watanabe once remarked that he preferred that his prints hang in the ordinary places of life. He said, "I would most like to see them hanging where people ordinarily gather, because Jesus brought the gospel for the people." Such is the *mingei* philosophy of art: for the people and by the people. How does this picture speak to you in relation to what you have just heard from scripture?

The first thing that strikes me is the person in the polka dot dress praying behind Jesus. I think it's the blind man's mother. Behind every son or daughter in a religious family there are parents praying. The prayers of parents are significant and efficacious. The biblical text gives one the impression that mother was not present at the healing but we do not know this. Nevertheless, the picture shows a mother's prayerful support. At the center of the picture is Jesus with one hand touching the Holy Spirit symbolized by the bird and the other touching the man's eyes. There is a direct line of God's healing from the Holy Spirit through Jesus to the man. The man is kneeling with hands clasped in prayerful anticipation and appreciation. Jesus looks towards God, the man looks towards Jesus and the mother looks on. Holiness and reverence unifies the picture. The work has symmetry, balance and harmony.

This is another amazing story, one of my favorites because of the gutsy character of the man who squares off with the Pharisees. Jesus performed a miracle on the Sabbath and instead of being happy with this powerful work of God the Pharisees are miffed that it was done on the Sabbath when one should not work. According to them, Jesus violates the sanctity of the Sabbath.

The final interchange between the man and the Pharisees is excellent. It must be the rebel in me that likes this section of the text. It's a kind David and Goliath story, the underdog standing up for himself and his friends. The text reads:

²⁴So 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 (referring to

Jesus).”²⁵ He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”²⁶ They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”²⁷ 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?”²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.”²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.”³⁰ The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.”³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.”³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.”³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”³⁴ They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

This is a liberation story. The man is freed from his blindness and he sings the song that the civil rights marchers sang in the 1950s and 1960s.

Ain't gonna let nobody
 Turn me around! Turn me around! Turn me around!
 Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around
 I'm gonna keep on a - walkin' keep on a - talkin'
 Marchin' down to freedom's land!

The man says that God does not listen to sinners. He was speaking in this particular context because God does listen to sinners in another context. God listens to those who repent of their sins. They are assured of God's graciousness and justice to forgive them and welcome them home.

Talking of sins, the Pharisees are quick to confine both Jesus and the man to sin. There is no grace and that's another point made by the writer of this story. In the Jesus lexicon, we are saved, healed and made whole by God's grace and grace happens every day of the week. What would we do today if a person were seriously injured in an accident on the Sabbath? We rush them to the hospital. We seek their healing and do everything in our power to make that happen. If a specialist passed through a developing world village on the Sabbath and would not pass that way again and she healed a rare disease of her specialty, would we frown on it? With respect, we would bless it.

What struck me about this passage is how the Pharisees try to tempt the man away from his relationship to God in Jesus, how they try to get the parents to deny Jesus and are thus killjoys when it comes to celebration of new life. We began our Sundays in Lent with the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Temptation comes to everyone in many guises. Today, the tempter comes to the one who Jesus heals. The tempter failed in the wilderness and now he or she goes after followers and potential followers of

Jesus. The tempter returns but to no avail. As Jesus defied the tempter in the wilderness, so this amazing man defies the tempter in this story.

It begs the questions: When are we tempted away from our relationship to God in Christ? How do we respond to those who want to kill the joy of our faith in Christ? The facts that we are here in worship together and listening and responding to God's word is proof enough that we are guarding our lives from the tempter and that we are enjoying our lives in Christ. I love the charge that says, "Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous and strong and let all that you do be done in love" and the promise that, "He who is in you is greater than the one in the world."

And so we move closer to Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection. I shall now close with a modern story of a blind man who "regained" his sight. The story was "given" to me during the week. I picked up a book (Mark Brady and Jennifer Austin, *A Little Book of Listening Skills*) that I read a couple of years ago and saw the story on the first page.

In post-apartheid South Africa the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up for perpetrators of apartheid crimes to come forward and speak what they did and for their victims to tell their stories. Both sides would listen and through this process of truth-telling, the two would hopefully experience reconciliation and healing. None of this was easy.

Many victims would simply tell their stories without a perpetrator present. They would speak of being healed by their own testimony. They knew that many people were listening to their story. One young man who had been blinded when a police officer shot him in the face at close range said, "I feel what has brought my eyesight back is to come here and tell the story. I feel what has been making me sick all this time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. But now it feels like I have my sight back by coming here and telling you the story."

God heals in many various and mysterious ways and stories of healing have many forms. Another modern way of course is through advances in medical science.

All of us have experienced the healing love and power of God and probably been tempted to turn away from God. We are here to defy temptation and to remain strong as we walk with Jesus to Jerusalem through the cross and into full-blown resurrection. Amen.