
Here's mud in your eye!
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 9:1-41

Here's mud in your eye! What a strange expression. As far as I can tell, there are two meanings for the phrase “here's mud in your eye”. The first meaning is an insult. The context is that if you are in a horse race, and you win, the second place rider will have mud in their eye thrown from your horse, which is of course in front. In that context, “here's mud in your eye” means “loser”. The other context for the phrase is as a toast, where you raise you glass in an expression of well-wishing. Some people say, “to your health” when they drink. Others say, “Here’s mud in your eye” which is a direct reference to Jesus healing the blind man by putting mud in his eye.

And if that expression isn’t strange enough - what on earth was that gospel story about? In my “Interpreter's Bible” the story is given the heading, “Healing of the Man Born Blind”. So the story is about healing. Simple. But ... I'm not so sure I agree with the editors of the “Interpreter's Bible” on this one. Granted, the key story that underlies our long reading included Jesus healing a blind person. But I don't think the story is about that at all. For one thing, of the 41 verses that we just read, only 2 verses describe Jesus healing the blind man. The other 39 verses are about the misunderstandings and controversies surrounding the healing. I think we need to look deeper. What did the people in the story think was going on?

The disciples speak first, so let's start with them. The disciples see the blind man, realize that he is blind, and jump instantly to question Jesus about guilt and fault. The disciples want to know *why* the man is blind. They express no concern for the man, they offer him no help, or water, or food. Many ancient cultures - and even modern cultures - affirm a basic relationship between punishment and morality. The whole book of Job in the Old Testament is a struggle around that idea - about what it means when bad things happen to good people. In this story, the disciples didn’t even question whether sin was the cause of the man’s blindness - they only questioned whose sin it was.

The Pharisees - to their credit - believe the man and his story. But they also are not particularly interested in the gift of sight. The Pharisees are only concerned with the process that was used to perform the healing. The Pharisees don't seem to blink at the idea of the man gaining his sight, but they struggle hard with the idea that such a miracle could happen on a sabbath day. The Pharisees don't care about the man - they are completely consumed with the identity of the person who performed the cure.

What about the parents? You might think that the parents would be delighted that their son can finally see their faces, and that they no longer have to support their blind son, who can now - presumably - work for a living. But the parents don't celebrate the new gift of sight for their son at all. The parents are only interested in not getting involved and not getting ejected from the synagogue.

And how about the group that is simply called, "the crowd". I'm not sure if they even knew that the man was cured of blindness. They seem to only understand that a trouble-maker is in their midst, and they want the problem - and the person - rooted out and thrown out. The crowd has no imagination to wonder - to wonder for example if perhaps Jesus could help them too.

But at least the man himself was pleased. "I know one thing. I was blind. Now I see." It's too bad that once the man could see, all he saw was people arguing and bickering about fault, guilt, identity, procedures, wanting to not get involved, and wanting to eject trouble-makers. I often wonder if the man yearned to be blind again - and perhaps deaf as well so he would not have to hear the bickering.

I find it easy to read this story and to be critical of the Pharisees and the crowd, who seem only interested in exploring the identity of this Jesus person and discussing the legitimacy of the cure. How on earth could they not care about the miracle of sight? But in broader terms, the Pharisees and the crowd were in fact focused on the legitimacy of Jesus's ministry. And they find Jesus's ministry to be lacking. Lacking in tradition. Lacking in rootedness. Lacking in religious-ness. Lacking in following the rules that they wanted to believe they lived by.

And it's at that point where I myself start to read this text with a more open mind. Remember that this story is in the gospel of John. And John was the last gospel to be

written. Don't forget, Jesus was not a Christian. During Jesus's lifetime, the followers of Jesus were Jewish. After Jesus's death and over time, this group became a sect within Judaism sometimes called "The Way". But as identification with Jesus as messiah increased as time progressed, this "Jewish sect" became increasingly seen as "not really Jewish". Followers of Jesus were ejected from the synagogue - and for good reason! This story speaks directly to that point. And it is no surprise that it appears in the gospel of John because it reflects the reality of the early Christian community.

In the words of Nancy Hastings Sehested, "The Johannine community who first heard this story rejoiced. Knowing excommunication from the synagogue [themselves], these Christ followers heard their [own] story in the blind man's story. They heard a reassuring word: Keep bearing witness. Don't expect to change the minds of the powers of this world. Jesus is coming back with judgment. Your job is to jump in the middle of God's work. Expect resistance and ridicule, but walk on toward the light."

So the story makes a great deal of sense, particularly for the early Christian community. But what do you think? Does it make sense for us too? Have you ever had the experience of the blind man - where something quite miraculous happened to you, but people around you didn't seem to notice or care?

[invite stories - when have you felt a miracle that others were oblivious to?]

During my ministry internship I worked as a student chaplain at Bridgepoint Health - that's the hospital that used to be called Riverdale, on the Don River in Toronto. I spent 3 months there in total and about 1 month in the palliative care unit. Most of the patients I met in palliative care came to the unit at a time in their lives that they could no longer speak, and they slept most of the time - so most of my interactions were with patient's families.

But I remember one person in particular - I'll call him "Steve". When Steve first came to the unit, he was quite articulate, and we had a number of good conversations. He had a wonderful sense of humour. And, he clearly loved life. He was the only patient I met on the palliative care unit that I would say I really got to know well directly - not just

through stories shared by family members.

I remember walking into Steve's room after he died. I held his hand - as I had done just an hour before when he was still alive. I prayed with him - as I had done just an hour before. Then, I had my last conversation with Steve's family. But somewhere in that experience, I was transformed. Steve helped me to see the circle of life. Steve helped me see peace in death. Holding Steve's warm but lifeless hand helped me connect with my own mortality.

When I left the hospital that evening, it was raining. I felt a chill run down my spine as I walked to the streetcar shelter, and I wasn't sure if it was caused by the damp air or by the transformation that had happened to me that day. I was greeted at the shelter by a drunk who was sitting in the shelter to stay dry, and to have a smoke. We chatted, but I could still see the hospital across the street, and part of me was still there. When the streetcar came, I got on, and was shocked to find that everything appeared to be perfectly normal. Didn't these passengers realize that something amazing had happened? Didn't the driver - a trained professional - know that life was transformed that day. Of course not! The earth had kept on spinning after all, and somehow, at that time, it just felt wrong to me.

In our story today, one person was transformed, and everyone else missed it. Ironically, the blind man gained sight, but everyone else - appears to be blind to that fact.

But in fact, healing is all around us, if we just look for it. Actually, I think our current COVID-19 crisis is causing the same phenomena to happen. On the one hand, all the news is all bad, right? Some people are getting sick, a much smaller number of people are dying, we hear stories of travellers who can't get home, we hear stories of normal citizens who can't buy toiletries. We hear stories of closing and cancelling: from schools to churches to book groups. And we fear that perhaps retail stores will close next, and perhaps even food stores. It's all bad, bad, bad, right? Why is Rev. Paul saying that there is healing here? Well there are some very real concerns of course. And for those of us who have a bit too much CNN in our diet, the news is always bad, bad, bad because that's how CNN designs its news.

And I'm not referring to the good news about the virus itself, like the fact that

recently Wuhan - the epicentre of the crisis - is improving. This image shows medical workers removing their masks because it is now safe to do so. I'm talking about the type of healing that existed before and will still exist long after we've forgotten how to spell coronavirus.

Because crisis does always lead to opportunity too. Here's one example. Before Christmas, I heard people complaining that society is too individualistic and nobody cares about anyone else. And that may have been true to some extent then. Now, we have lots of stories of people uncharacteristically reaching out to help others.

On Mar 16 on reddit there was a story from someone who was worried about their rent, and their landlord waived the rent for 2 months. How cool is that? What's the last time that happened?

I ventured into Costco this week, and got a lot more than groceries. I started chatting to a random stranger and we discussed - together - what he should buy for the local food bank. This person had never donated to a food bank before in his life so he needed just a little help filling his cart with the most suitable items. Not only had he decided to support the local food bank due to the crisis, he actually reached out for help choosing products - something men are not well-known for. Wow.

I didn't make it out of the Costco without quite a number of pastoral conversations actually. People are - shall we say - a bit stressed right now, and you can be an everyday hero by simply listening to other people and acknowledging their fears.

On Mar 17, a cafe owner who was very concerned about dwindling business due to all the closures was greeted by a regular customer who handed the owner \$3000 and said, "I want you to still be here when this is all over". What's the last time that happened?

If you yourself do not see this healing all around you, go make it happen yourself. People are so stressed that it's easier than you might think to have a positive impact. Hand out food downtown. Call up church members that might be lonely. Keep in touch with family and friends. Some of the paths to healing are very simple.

As the Lenten season surges ahead, I invite each of us to be open to seeing the healing that is going on all around us. Healing that perhaps it is easy to miss. Healing that

is not immediately apparent. And perhaps we can all find symptoms of that healing in our own lives too.

Just because you don't immediately see healing does not mean that it's not there. Look more deeply. Feel more deeply. Find the healing that you need.

Here's mud in your eye!

Amen.