

We're in the third week of our four-week series of Gospel lessons from John. The past two lessons have been long conversations between Jesus and another person.

In ch3, we met Nicodemus, who after his conversation with Jesus eventually changed. But the evidence of the change was delayed, not appearing until a couple of years after the conversation.

In ch4 we met the Samaritan woman. After her conversation with Jesus, she changed immediately. She realized that Jesus could quench her deepest thirsts, and went and told the people in her town all about him.

But today, we see a very different encounter in John ch9. Our Gospel lesson today is the entire 9th chapter. In this chapter, Jesus heals a blind man early on. But then Jesus disappears for over 2/3^{rds} of the chapter. He doesn't reappear until near the end. Thus the blind man is left all by himself to deal with the religious authorities. Jesus then comes back, and addresses them all.

So this morning I want to look at the blind man and at the religious leaders in their reactions to the healing. But I want to do it in reverse order.

First, I want to focus on the reactions of the Jewish religious leaders to the healing. Their reaction, of all things, reminds me of a scene in one of the old Pink Panther movies. If you're not familiar with the series, Peter Sellers plays police Inspector Clouseau. The running joke is that Inspector Clouseau is totally incompetent, a bumbling idiot. But by accident he somehow manages to solve major crime cases again and again. Thus the world thinks he's a brilliant detective. Only chief of detectives knows how incompetent Clouseau truly is.

There's a wonderful scene early on in *Return of the Pink Panther* where Inspector Clouseau has been busted back from detective to patrolman. He encounters a blind street musician, and begins questioning him extensively as to whether he has the proper license to be a street musician. Meanwhile, while he is focused on minor infractions of minor city ordinances, an armed bank robbery takes place right behind him. In fact, he's so clueless, so blind, that he assists the robbers in their escape, and hits the bank manager with his nightstick.

In John 9, the religious authorities have a similar problem. Their focus is totally off. They think they have a total lock on spiritual things. They think they have a complete understanding of how God is operating. And because of that, most of them have closed their minds to how God is present and active in Jesus Christ.

The middle 2/3^{rds} of Jn9 focuses on these leaders. They bring the former blind man in for a first round of questioning. This first time, they're basically questioning how the healing could have taken place.

Then they bring in the man's parents. The parents plead the 5th. They don't want to talk about Jesus or the healing. All they'll stipulate to is that, 'Yes, this is their son, and yes, he was born blind.'

Then the religious authorities bring the blind man in for a second round of interrogation. And at the end, they excommunicate him.

This is a tragedy. The religious leaders should be celebrating the fact that one of their fellow Jews has experienced such a wonderful healing. Instead, they engage some dark behavior, eventually kicking him out of their religious fellowship.

In the military there is a tragic term called friendly fire. It has always been an issue in warfare, but it's become more common since the invention of firearms. Friendly fire is when soldiers are wounded or killed because of mistakes made by their own side. It can be a horribly demoralizing thing, casualties caused by your own side.

Sadly, religious communities sometimes engage in friendly fire. People of faith sometimes get embroiled in controversies and fights and wrangling over peripheral issues. And this kind of fighting can cause spiritual casualties. It is a sad and tragic thing.

And that's what happens with the Jewish leaders and the man born blind. Instead of celebrating what God has done for the man, the leaders are more interested in defending their own particular understanding of who God is. And since Jesus doesn't fit the bill from their standpoint, they excommunicate the man who has been healed by Jesus.

The subtext of this entire section is that while the blind man can now see, the religious leaders are spiritually blind. They're blind to who Jesus is. They're blind to the fact that Jesus is bringing God's light into the world.

This is a strong warning for all of us. One of the most dangerous things in the Christian life is to think we have an absolute lock on God, to think that we understand everything there is to know about God. The God of scripture constantly calls his people to grow and change. The God of scripture pushes the envelope over and over again, asking his people to expand their understanding of who he is, asking his people to open their eyes more widely to see him at work in the world.

Having our eyes shut and our minds closed to God is one of the most dangerous spiritual states possible.

But does that mean we have to be agnostic about everything? Do we have to say, "Well, I want to be open minded, so I guess I can't believe anything specific; thus I have to be open to everything"? That's NOT the point of John 9. And we see that in the other main character, the blind man himself.

At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus heals the blind man. The blind man never asks to be healed. Jesus heals him because of who Jesus is.

Jesus first says, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." And then he brings light to the blind man by healing him. You'd think the man's problems would be over, but they've only begun.

He's hauled before the Jewish authorities twice. When they ask him how he was healed, he simply repeats what Jesus did. When they ask his opinion of Jesus, the man replies, "He is a prophet."

In other words, he doesn't know everything there is to know about Jesus. He's not a full-fledged disciple. But he does know what Jesus has done for him. He knows where the blessing comes from. He knows Jesus is the source of his healing.

Later on, the authorities question him again. The man sticks to his story. Even in the face of opposition, he credits Jesus for healing him. He doesn't claim to know everything about everything, but with bulldog tenacity he hangs on to Jesus.

He even goes on the offensive. He makes a fairly long statement. Listen to his chain of reasoning:

"Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

Even though Jesus is absent from the scene, the formerly blind man does not forget him. He doesn't know everything about Jesus. But he knows enough. He knows what Jesus has done for him, and he hangs on to that.

And that's an important lesson for us. It's dangerous to claim to know everything there is to know about God. So what can we do? We can focus on Jesus. We can remember what Jesus has done for us. We can hold on to him in the midst of tough times. We can trust and believe in him. We can seek to follow him. We can keep our eyes open to see him at work around us.

When Jesus meets the man a second time, Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man, God's agent in the world. The man asks, "Who is he." Jesus says, "It's me."

The man responds, "Lord, I believe." Up until this point in John, this is the fullest expression of faith given by anyone: "Lord, I believe." 'Lord I trust you.'

The blind man not only has received physical sight. He has also been given a glimpse of the true light. He was in the darkness, but now he seeks to follow the source of light that has appeared to him. He makes no claims to be enlightened totally himself. He doesn't claim to understand the light. He simply follows the source of light.

May we be open to the true light. May we seek to follow him.

Lord Jesus, you are the light of the world. Help us to seek your face. Open our eyes to see you at work in the world around us. Heal our blindness. Heal our arrogance. Help us to follow you.