

But Now I See
John 9 & 10
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First Central Congregational UCC
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Back in February, Stephen and I were selecting hymns for that week's worship. It was going to be the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany and I was preaching on John 3:16-21, which includes that most famous of verses "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." That's the King James Version I memorized as a child.

My sermon title was "Light in the Darkness," and the message of that sermon was that "in the midst of our darkness, Jesus proclaims that God is giving us light and life and love and that this is our salvation." We wanted the hymns to celebrate our personal experience of salvation. For the opening hymn, we selected "O splendor of God's glory bright," which opens with "O splendor of God's glory bright, from light eternal bringing light; O light of light, light's living spring, O day of days, illumining." The second hymn was the gospel anthem "I Am the Light of the World" based on a Christmas poem by Howard Thurman. The verses rejoice in the effects of the gospel, "To find the lost and lonely one, to heal the broken soul with love, to feed the hungry children with warmth and good food." And the refrain is the celebratory "I am the light of the world! You people come and follow me! If you follow and love, you'll learn the mystery of what you were meant to do and be."

And for our final hymn, we selected the great Methodist anthem "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing." We then chose to sing it from the Red hymnal instead of the Black. In the black hymnal there are only four verses and we didn't, on this particular Sunday, care for the order in which they are listed. We wanted to end on the verse "My gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim, and spread through all the earth abroad the honors of thy name." That sending forth would be a great way to conclude the service. We also liked that the Red hymnal included a couple of verses about salvation, healing, and wholeness that echoed themes of that week's service. I'll get to one of these in a moment, because it's the reason for this story, which I promised a month ago to share.

But, first, let me say a little bit about this hymn. It was written by Charles Wesley in 1739, one of the over 6,500 hymns that Wesley wrote during his lifetime. Charles' brother John was the great founder and preacher of Methodism, and Charles' music probably played as much a role in this great revival movement as John's speaking and organizing. Plus, it is Charles' hymns which have been adopted by multiple denominations and beloved of millions of Christians.

This particular hymn actually has eighteen verses, which you can find in the Methodist hymnal. The verse we usually begin with, "O for a thousand tongues to sin my dear Redeemer's praise" is actually the seventh verse of the eighteen. Both of our hymnals leave out such fun verses as these:

Harlots and publicans and thieves,
in holy triumph join!
Saved is the sinner that believes
from crimes as great as mine.

Murderers and all ye hellish crew,
ye sons of lust and pride,
believe the Savior died for you;
for me the Savior died.

There's a powerfully radical egalitarianism in those verses. All of us stand equally in need of God's grace, whether the most upright churchwoman or the most hellish rogue. And God's grace is equally loving and welcoming of all of us, no matter who we are or where we are in life's journey.

It is this amazing grace of God which leads to the "passionate personal Christian experience," as one commentator calls it, that Wesley celebrates throughout the hymn. Another writer indicates that the hymn prompts us to ask questions such as:

What happens when God comes into a life and makes it his own? What difference does it make . . . ? Are we the same person inside? Do we think and feel the same way? . . . Are we different than we would have been?

Wesley most definitely thinks that we are different. The grace of God has changed us; we have become a new person, and the natural response is gratitude and praise.

It was that sense which Stephen and I wanted to capture of that particularly Sunday by using this hymn. And, in particular, we wanted to sing the version printed in the Red hymnal was because of this verse:

Hear him, ye deaf:
his praise, ye dumb,
your loosened tongues employ;
ye blind, behold
your Savior come;
and leap, ye lame,
for joy.

Our reasons for selecting this verse were myriad: it's passionate celebration of the gospel, it's anticipation of our Lenten theme of healing, and what we took to be its inclusion of people with disabilities within the family of God. It also has metaphorical meanings that Stephen, in particular, was drawn to. "We are all spiritually deaf," Stephen said. "We are all spiritually blind. We are all spiritually lame." And, thus, equally in need of the saving love of God.

Thursday morning, February 13, I opened up my e-mail and read the following from Barb Switzer,

You may know that Stephen has us practice the hymns for the following Sunday at our choir rehearsals. As we started with "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing", I asked why we were using the "red hymnal" when I knew it was in the New Century Hymnal. Stephen told us that you really liked the theology of the 4th verse, in that it points out that all can worship God.

I understand your reasoning for liking that verse, but frankly, I find the archaic language referring to persons with disabilities to be offensive. "Dumb" is no longer used in the disability community as a description of a person who cannot speak, as it implies an intellectual disability as well as no speech, or unintelligible speech. I realize that the verse will go by quickly, and people may not notice it, but I wanted to bring this to your attention. It seems to me that inclusive language is more than watching out for gender bias. If our goal is to be more inviting to those in the disability community, than this is something to consider in all aspects of our worship, not just in our physical surroundings or accommodations.

And that's the moment when you realize that your good intentions can sometimes lead to the opposite message. We eliminated verse four when we sang the hymn that Sunday, and I told you then that I'd tell you the story later.

On the one hand, it is a great story of how we do worship here. The word "liturgy" means "work of the people," so our worship, we hope, arises from you—from your pastoral concerns, your intellectual questions, your thoughts and ideas that we gather from conversations and classes. It is also drawn from your talents and gifts. I was pleased that the final form of that week's worship resulted from what was a three day dialogue via e-mail and direct conversations, first trying to make changes to the words of the verse, and ultimately choosing to eliminate it.

I tell the story today, however, not simply in the context of explaining how we shape worship, but because it echoes with this wonderful story of Jesus healing the man born blind. And to understand fully how it does so, I have to point out that the gospel story really includes most of chapter 10 as well, though I chose not to read that extended a Gospel text today. What occurs in chapter 10? Jesus himself gives the explanation for what just happened in the healing of the blind man and the series of actions that others take in response.

Notice, first, the conclusion of the action in chapter 9. After the religious authorities grill the man who has long been treated as an outcast and who now powerfully defends himself, they conclude by saying "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And, then, "they drove him out."

After which Jesus goes searching for him, and after a short dialogue about sin and belief, Jesus, in chapter 10, gives a long speech about how he is the Good Shepherd. Here are some snippets from Jesus' monologue:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . I know my own and my own know me. . . . I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one

shepherd.

What does this beautiful passage have to do with the healing of the blind man and the response of others to it? Karoline Lewis explains in her commentary on the story, "The blind man, having been cast out by the Pharisees, needs a community, a family, a place where he will be cared for, and loved."

In this great story we encounter themes of disability, sinfulness, divine action, and religious rules and identity. But Jesus tells us that the central theme is about who is included within the family of God. It is the Pharisees, in this story who commit the sin because they are blind to God's desire that no one be excluded. Charles Wesley, thousands of years later, got it right. Everyone including harlots, thieves, murderers, the hellish crew, and all of the rest of us received the amazing, overwhelming love of God and are welcomed and included within God's family.

One thing we must be very cautious of is how we talk about the connection between healing and persons with disabilities. Because we can come across as patronizing and condescending and reaffirming the idea that wholeness and health is someone who is, quote, "normal." And what Barb rightly pointed out about that particular verse in the hymn "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" is that it could reaffirm those dangerous ideas.

The profoundly beautiful truth is that there is no such thing as "normal" when it comes to human beings. We all lie along various spectra of physical, mental, and emotional ability, and at various times in our lives, we move along that spectrum. We must get rid of the notion that labels define separate groups of people – "Here are the mentally ill people and here are the mentally well people. These are the physically disabled and those are the physically abled. Here are those with cognitive disabilities and here are those without." As if these were permanent and clearly defined categories. For they are not. These categories are fluid; we all move in and out of them through our lifetimes.

And this fluidity and diversity is not a flaw in our humanity. It is in fact the way God created us. I was reading this week about people who are deaf who resist cochlear implants and other attempts to "fix" them because they are whole and complete just the way they are and that their life experiences as deaf people enrich humanity. And I think, for instance, of the great blessings that Grant, Billy, and Katie have been to this congregation, just exactly the way they are.

In this gospel story, Jesus may have miraculously healed a man born blind, but he did so to create an opportunity to teach everyone that those who really needed healing were all the people who didn't realize that the man was complete, whole, and valuable just the way that he was born. The ones who needed healing in this story were all the others, who were blind to the expansive and inclusive love of God.

And, so, in last month's church Council meeting, we discussed our church's welcome of persons with special needs. There is a lot that we are doing well, including this chancel renovation, but there is even more that we can do. And just as the United Church of Christ has a designation for churches who are "Open and Affirming" of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons, the UCC also has a designation for churches who are "Accessible to All."

Just like that other designation, there is a process to go through and criteria to meet, and soon the Council will appoint a task force to guide us as we seek to formally become an “Accessible to All” congregation. This will be one of our new goals that should focus our attention in the coming year, and I’m quite excited about it.

Because it is another opportunity for us to let the amazing grace of God work in our lives bringing us to health and wholeness. We who may have been lost and blind in ignorance, prejudice, or condescending paternalism, will find our salvation. For we will see one another as God sees us, welcome one another as God welcomes us, and love one another as God loves us.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind but now I see.