

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Rev. John F. Koerner

John 9:1-41

One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see. (John 9:25 N.R.S.V.)

This I Know

Several years ago, Morton Kelsey interviewed dozens of Roman Catholic lay people. He was exploring with them their personal histories with God. Much to his surprise he found that the majority of those he interviewed reported at least one life-changing, mystical experience. Most of them also said, "And I never told anyone about it." Why? "Because people would think, I'm crazy." (Pulpit Resources, January-March, 2017, pg. 41)

I was very intrigued by this. Kelsey only interviewing Roman Catholics, but I think he would have gotten the same results if he had interviewed Presbyterians. Not only are we sometimes called, "God's Frozen Chosen," but we are very big on Paul's advise in 1 Corinthians 14:40, ". . . but all things should be done decently and in order." It is safe to say that many Presbyterians are not sure what to make of mystical experiences.

So here is your big word for today, "Epistemology." Epistemology simply means "How do you know what you know?" So the next time that someone is feeding you fake news. Instead of saying, "Liar, liar, pants on fire!" You can just say, "What is your epistemology?" If nothing else that should confuse them long enough for you to walk away.

In the modern world most of our epistemological methods work great for explaining the physical, material world. However, when it comes to the nonmaterial, the spiritual world, we struggle. We only know that we know.

Wil Willimon talks about two of the major epistemology models we use. One of them is the way of knowing that characterizes subjects like mathematics. When you are pondering a difficult mathematical problem, you try various approaches until at last you make a break through. You say, "I got it!"

However, there is a different kind of knowing, a different epistemological method that we use in thinking about the arts, philosophy, or spiritual matters. In thinking about a good movie afterwards, we don't say, "I got it." Instead we say the more profound, "It got me."

Here's the thing. Most of us did not come to belief in Jesus Christ because we sat down in a

thoughtful way and worked through all the major religions of the world and decided that logically Christianity made the most sense. Most of us have trouble explaining how we know what we know when it comes to faith. We simply know that, it got us! Or perhaps we should say, “Christ got us.”

In our text for today from John the man born blind has a mystical, life-changing experience. The blind man does not even seek Jesus out. Jesus sees him and stops to heal him.

The disciples immediately want to know, who sinned? It was a common belief back then that bad things happen to people because they have sinned. So the disciples are thinking that this must have been a very serious sin for this man to be born blind. In their way of thinking, someone had to have committed sin, either this man or perhaps his parents.

Notice that Jesus has zero interest in that line of thought. He says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” For those of us who get caught up in such things. No, Jesus is not saying this man is sinless. Rather he is saying that his blindness was not the result of sin. Nor is Jesus implying that this man had to suffer blindness for years, just so Jesus could use him as a demonstration of his powers.

Jesus’ explanation here is more along the line of how you might answer your child’s question, “Why does the sun come up in the morning?” You might reply, “The sun comes up in the morning so that we know when it is time to get up.” That is not the complete answer, but it is one that your child can use for now.

Jesus wants to focus the disciple’s attention on what is happening in the here and now. Jesus is about to give the blind man a life-changing, mystical experience. And that is what Jesus wants the disciples to be focusing on.

Jesus spits in the dust, makes some mud and rubs it on the blind man’s eyes. Then he tells him to go wash it off. Again that seems like a very strange thing to us. But the use of spit and mud was a common healing practice back then. Yes, Jesus could have healed him without that, but he chooses to do the healing within the way the man can accept.

Now we get to the interesting part. There is a sense of comedy about what happens next even though the actors are very serious. The religious authorities get involved. After all there must be standards.

So the pharisees have this formally blind man before them. It would be a mistake on our part to see the pharisees as the bad guys in this little drama. They were acting like good Presbyterians, everything decently and in order. We can’t have loose cannons running around giving people wild ideas. Who is this so called healer? What seminary did he graduate from? Did he pass all of his ordination exams? There must be standards!

The pharisees devoted their whole lives to understanding the law and keeping the law. This

healing had taken place on the Sabbath, and that was against the law of Moses. Therefore, they knew, they just knew that Jesus couldn't be from God.

The pharisees were not bad people. We might even admire their zeal. But they were spiritually blind as bats. They forgot that the purpose of the law was to help people, instead of being a burden on them.

The pharisees were so afraid of breaking the law that they made up 100s of little laws to prevent that. If a man were to go out to the market for food, he must wash completely before he sat down to eat. This was not a matter of sanitation or cleanliness, it was because he might have touched or brushed up against a Gentile in the market and become ritually unclean.

Women were forbidden to look in a mirror on Sunday. Because if they did, they might see a gray hair and pluck it, and that would be breaking the Sabbath.

The pharisees ask the man who healed him. At that point he is afraid. The pharisees have the power to throw someone out of the temple. To the Jews that meant that they couldn't make sacrifices and their sins would not be forgiven.

The man says, "I don't really know who he was. I was blind at the time. So I didn't really see him."

The pharisees are in a bad position here. They have made up their minds that Jesus is not the messiah. Therefore, they had to prove him wrong. So they did what good lawyers do. They tried to cast doubt on the witness. They called in the man's parents.

Maybe this blind man was not real article. Maybe he was a plant that Jesus was using to fool people into thinking he was sent from God. Maybe this guy we just saw was never blind to start with. "Is this man we just talked to really your son?"

"Yes, we are sure that he is our own son."

Well, that one didn't work. "Has he really been blind from birth? Are you sure that he can now see?"

"Yes, we are sure that he was born blind and has been blind ever since. Yes, we are sure that he can see now. He has proved it to us. There can be no doubt."

So now for the big question. "We know that this Jesus fellow is a sinner. How can your son now be healed?"

The parents are now truly uncomfortable and fearful that they will be barred from the temple. So they say, "We don't know. He is adult. Ask him."

The pharisees have the newly healed man brought in and they question him some more. By this time the newly healed man has found his courage. He tells them, "This I know, I was blind but

now I see.”

In the end that is all we can say our own mystical experiences. We can't explain them, we just know that they did happen.

One preacher tells about a member of his congregation who had lurched and stumbled from one addiction to another over the years. He tried counseling and addiction programs and nothing worked. He lost his wife, and his life went from bad to worse.

One day he came to his pastor and said, “Jesus came to me and touched me. He took away my all my addictions.” The pastor tried his best to be open and affirming, but there must have been something in his face that showed some scepticism. The man said, “I don't know how this happened. I can't explain it, but this I know. I was a drunk and Jesus healed me.”

Members of the congregation were also skeptical and disbelieving. “I wonder if he was sober when he saw Jesus.” “It's too bad that Jesus couldn't have healed him before he lost his wife.”

Some of the members of the congregation came to the pastor with their doubts. What do you think? The pastor said, “Who knows? He says he is healed. He says Jesus did it. Who are we to doubt him?”

Several times over the years people would question this man about his healing. How come, they wanted to know, Jesus healed you and not all of those other people suffering from addiction?

Each time he replied simply, “All I know is that I was a drunk, going down for the third time, unable to help myself, and then Jesus cured me. That's all I know.” When this man remained sober for many years, people began to say, “Well, I guess he really was healed by Jesus.” Even then all the man would say was, “All I know is I was dying, and then Jesus rescued me.” (Pulpit Resources, pg. 40-41)

Over the years I have noticed that many people seem to be almost embarrassed to talk about their mystical experiences with God. When they do share, people will often end by saying, “All I know preacher is, it happened just as clear as day, just like I'm sitting in front of you.”

Here is what I know today. God does give us mystical experiences that we can't really explain and we don't have to. So if God gives you, or someone you love such an experience. Accept it, be grateful. Don't engage in useless speculation about why this happened to you and not to someone else. Don't let the cynics shut you down.

You know what you know. Go ahead and face the world with confidence and say, “All I know is . . . Let that be enough.

Amen.