

## *Called to Light*

“Becoming Authentically Human: Called & Shaped by Jesus” - Part 4

John 9:1-41, Ephesians 5:8-14, Psalm 23

April 3, 2011

Last Sunday as Alex talked about the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, I couldn't help but think how we would do as a congregation welcoming a woman who had been married five times and was now living with another man. Would we be able to accept her unconditionally as Jesus did? Would we go out of our way to have an encounter with a person like that?

How many here this morning know the title of this year's Lenten series? “Becoming authentically human.” What does it really mean to be authentically human? The word “authentic” means to be genuine, real, true, not false. What you see, what you hear, is what you get. Unfortunately church is one of those places where people are most afraid to be genuine or authentic. We're afraid to really share our dark side because we know we are going to be judged. People on the outside are afraid to come because they know they don't have it all together and there is no way they can live up to the expectations of the people on the inside.

The Bible tells us we were all “created in the image of God.” But then because of the great fall we have all suffered severe damage to that image. Yes, some of that image of God remains in all of us, but there is also a lot of junk - a lot of brokenness, a lot of sin, a lot of distortion of that image. Even the ability to perceive that image has been distorted

The title for our message this morning, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, is “*Called to Light.*” The primary Scripture being the story of “the man blind from birth.” Actually it is a story of all of us. All of us are born blind: Blind to our own fallenness, our own sinfulness, our own need for a Savior. Ever since Adam and Eve and the results of the fall, we are all born into darkness.

One of the interesting things in the story of the man blind from birth is that it doesn't say anywhere where he actually asked to be healed from his blindness. Lots and lots of people are talking about him, especially after he came to be healed, but it doesn't say anything about himself asking for the healing.

Lots and lots of talk today about the breakdown of the institutions that were once the core of our society. The breakdown of religious institutions, our communities, and our families. And rightfully so, we should be concerned. But just maybe that is being a little too nostalgic. Perhaps too much longing for a past that might not have been as rosy as we like to think it was. Because even in our story this morning, that which occurred some 2,000 years ago, those three institutions - the religious, the community, and the family, all three let the blind man down.

The religious: they just wanted to know who had sinned, the man born blind or his parents. Which when you think of it, is kind of funny. Yeah, it doesn't take us long, once we come out of the womb, to sin, but it is kind of hard to do it before we are born. But isn't that what we still do today? We look at a lot of the suffering that people are experiencing, some which seems to be the consequences of the choices one has made in his/her life, and we want to first blame it on their own sin, or perhaps the past sins of their families. The religious, represented by the Pharisees, they don't really want to know anything about Jesus and the possibility of him being able to have healed the blind man. They don't want to believe! "Oh, he wasn't really born blind." They become more concerned with Jesus healing on the Sabbath. "Forget about the miracle and healing of the blind man, we need to address the sinner who healed on the Sabbath."

And then we have the community: His own neighbors. *"His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, 'Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg.' Some claimed it was he. Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him'"* (v. 8-9). Here they lived in the same neighborhood, probably ever since he was a young boy, and they don't even recognize him. Or perhaps they only knew him by his blindness, his disability. They kept their distance. Much like the neighbors of the Samaritan woman at the well, who we looked at last week.

And then the blind man's own family. His own parents are afraid, more concerned about their own safety. "Oh, you need to ask him, he's of age, he can talk for himself. All's we know is that he was born blind. How he was healed, we don't know. And that Jesus person we don't know anything about. Leave us out of it."

Almost everybody fails the man born blind. The religious people failed him, the community failed him, even his own parents failed him. The only genuine, authentic, and trustworthy figures in this story are the man born blind and Jesus. The formerly blind man tells the truth, even in the face of threats and the abandonment of his own community and family and he sticks to his guns. "This one thing I know, I was born blind and now I see, and this is the person who has healed me." Again and again and again, the man witnesses to the saving grace that he has experienced in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only one the man can trust. It is Jesus who transforms. It is Jesus who heals. It is Jesus who stands with him till the end. It is Jesus who stands with us too. The light of the world stands among us.

Like the Samaritan woman at the well, the once blind man recognizes Jesus gradually, over time. He goes from seeing the man called Jesus (v.11), to calling Jesus a prophet (v. 17), to recognizing that he must be from God (v. 33), to finally addressing him as "Lord" and worshiping him (v.38) at the end of the story. "Lord, I do believe."

Jesus not only is the light of the world (John 9:5) but he calls his followers to come out of the darkness and into the light. *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”* (John 8:12).

The New Testament epistle reading for this morning is from Ephesians 5:8-14,

*For you were once darkness, but now you are the light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. That is why it is said: “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”*

And the passage which we looked at two weeks ago from John 3, that which we get the great verse, John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” But as I said two weeks ago, if we just leave it as that one verse, we fall short of the true Christian life. We need to read what comes after:

*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.*  
John 3:17-18 (NIV)

And the next verses are important as well:

*This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.*  
John 3:19-21 (NIV)

We can’t claim to “believe in Christ,” to be “in Christ,” if we are not at least moving from darkness into the light. For those of us who have been studying the Book of Romans on Sunday evenings, the apostle Paul clearly understood the difference between darkness and light. Between walking in the flesh, our sinful nature, and walking in the Spirit. There clearly are two worlds; the first world which we are born into leads to death, and the second, which we are re-born into, leads to life. The dichotomy, or separation or contrast of the two, is evident in all of Paul’s writings:

*So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit which is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*  
Galatians 5:16:21 (NIV)

But, if you have come into the light, if you have crossed over to the other side, from darkness into light, then:

*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.* Galatians 5:22-25 (NIV)

What does it really mean to come into the light? It is mostly the result of the Holy Spirit's transformation in our lives. Moving from darkness into the light is something which takes all of our lives here on earth. We never quite get there. Becoming "authentically human" is not easy. It is about taking the false mask off. Peeling off layer after layer. Removing our spiritual blinders. And it often comes at a cost. One of the Lenten devotions I received this week came from a woman by the name of Ruth Haley Barton, who at one time served on the pastoral staff at Willow Creek Community Church outside of Chicago, and is now a very well-respected leader and speaker on Spiritual Transformation and at the beginning of the devotion she quotes Fr. Thomas Keating, another very well respected spiritual leader:

"The spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound." Fr. Thomas Keating

Barton adds her own words to that quote: "I agree with that statement. I don't like it but I know it is true. And it makes me wonder if any of us are ready for the journey of transformation - really. We long for more in our spiritual lives, that's for sure, but I'm not sure we're ready for the harrowing journey of death to the false self that any true spiritual journey entails.

"We want God as long as we can still have our successes. We like the idea of faith as long as it doesn't require too much. . .well, faith. We long for the Promised Land as long as we don't have to leave anything behind. We want space for God as long as it doesn't intrude too radically on our packed schedules and conflicting priorities. We want self-knowledge as long as it doesn't cut too close to the ego bone. We want God's will as long as it doesn't make us look too foolish. We want love as long as it's not too inconvenient. We'd like to buy the pearl of great price as long as we don't have to sell everything we have. We're willing to wax eloquent about the Paschal Mystery (the death and rising of Jesus Christ) as long as we're not the one doing the dying.

But you see that's not how it works. It's not just about Jesus dying and going to the cross. Jesus said, "if anyone wants to come after me, he too must take up his cross and follow me. Forever who wants to save his life must lose it and whoever loses his life for me will be saved" (Luke 9:23).

For those who have been called into the light, the darkness needs to be exposed. The truth is there is enough junk in all of us, and how are we getting it out? Are we getting it out?

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.  
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from  
all unrighteousness.* 1 John 1:8-9 (NIV)

*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be  
healed.* James 5:16 (NIV)

Being “authentically human” is about recognizing that though we were created in the image of God, there is darkness in all of us. Being “authentically human” also means we all have imperfect vision - it is partial and superficial. “*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face*” (1 Cor. 12a NIV)

Religious people are just as blind, or maybe even more blind, than others. Lent is the time in which we are supposed to look within ourselves. In what area of my life do I still have spiritual blinders on? Where do I need to ask Jesus to help me see more clearly?

Who can you be “authentic” with? Who can you confess to?

Confession is one of those areas in which the Mennonite Church falls far short. We have never been able to come up with a good alternative to the Roman Catholic’s confession and penance. The penance part really isn’t needed. For those of us who have struggled with some deep sin in our lives, for any length of time, the penance is already there. And Jesus has already paid for sin. It’s just a matter of getting it out. Bringing it to light. That’s where confession comes in.

-Who do you talk to when you are struggling with pornography?

Oh, I know it’s hard to believe that anyone in our church would struggle with pornography. But all the research tells us that there are probably many among us.

- How about when you are struggling with your spouse, maybe even thinking about leaving, or having an affair, who do you talk to?

- How about when you are struggling in your relationships with your children?

- How about something in your past - some deep secret that has been hidden in the dark for a long time but needs to come into the light?

Becoming authentically human, becoming an “authentic Christian community,” is about acknowledging that there is both darkness and light in all of us. It is about helping each other move from the darkness to the light and it is about allowing people the opportunity to acknowledge the darkness, the junk, the sin in their lives, and the opportunity to confess those sins, and to be able to do it without being judged. And the only way to do that is with the light of Christ.

Let us Pray, Father God, we come to you this morning, now more than half way through the Lenten season. The time of the Christian year in which we focus on going to the cross. A very dark time in the life of your Son, Jesus - the light of the world - whom you sent to move us from

darkness into light. From death to eternal life. And you tell us that the only way we can do that is if we take up our own crosses. This morning we acknowledge to you that we have our own sin to bear, both individually and collectively as a church. Yes, we were created in your image, but we have all become distorted. Help us to see more clearly. Help us to see together. Help us to become “authentically human” - to be genuine and true, fallen human creatures redeemed by your Son. In His name we pray, Amen.