

“Living in the Heart: Love”

John 9:1-17, 24-34

The story is told about a woman who was an associate pastor of a large Presbyterian church in southern California. This woman loved to go to Nordstrom department store in Bel Air during the Christmas season, mostly just to enjoy the ambiance and the live Christmas music on all five floors. This is one of the fanciest department stores in this country.

On one of her visits, the minister was on the top floor of the store looking at some of the finest dresses in the world, when the elevator doors opened and out stepped a very disheveled looking woman. Her clothes were dirty and torn, her hair was matted, her stockings were rolled down to her ankles. She just stood there holding a very full and very dirty gym bag in her hand and it was obvious that she probably wasn't going to buy anything—all the dresses were in the multi thousand-dollar category. The minister half-expected a security guard to come and show the woman out. But instead of a security guard, a stately saleswoman came over to the woman with the gym bag and asked, "May I help you, madam?" The woman said, "Yeah! I wanna buy a dress!" "Any particular kind of dress?" the saleswoman asked in a very kind and dignified manner. "A party dress!" the woman answered. "Well you've come to the right place," said the saleswoman. "Follow me. I think we have some of the finest party dresses in the world." The saleswoman then spent more than fifteen minutes matching the dresses with the woman's skin color and eye color, trying to help her find just the right match. After selecting three dresses, the saleswoman said, "Shall we go and try them on?" They headed into the dressing room. The minister hurried into the adjoining dressing room and put her ear up to the wall. She had to hear what would happen next. The woman with the gym bag tried on the dresses with the saleswoman's help. But then, after about ten minutes, the woman said very abruptly, "I've changed my mind. I'm not going to buy a dress today!" The minister in the adjoining cubicle held her breath and heard the saleswoman say, "That's all right." And then, in a gentle voice she said, "But here's my card. Should you come back to Nordstrom, I do hope that you'll ask for me. I would consider it such a privilege to wait on you again."

Now what would motivate such an action? Who in their right mind would waste their time that way? I believe it is the power of God's light and love in the life of the saleswoman that motivated her to act in that way. God's love is a force that transforms our hearts to act in ways that often don't make sense to our calculating minds. These ways of love can bring tremendous healing to our world.

The story in John's Gospel which we read today is another story about unconditional love. It is about a blind man who is healed by Jesus. According to the understanding of the people in his day, the man was an outcast, much like the woman with the gym bag in Nordstrom. Blindness and other ailments were often viewed in ancient times as punishment for sin. The disciples of Jesus and the leaders who opposed him assumed this. The blind man did not deserve love or healing. He only deserved scorn and disrespect. This is evident from the debate that ensued after the healing about whose fault it was that the man was blind. But through God's wisdom and love Jesus breaks the rules of his day to share God's light. Biblical scholar Richard Rohrbaugh speaks of an ancient custom of spitting in the presence of the blind in order to protect oneself from the "evil eye." Jesus transforms that act of disdain into one of healing.

This is one of those important stories about the identity of Jesus as the Messiah and the light of the world. Let's consider the context of the story. The feast of Tabernacles (Sukkoth) was one of the great celebrations of the Jewish liturgical calendar at the time of Jesus, as it is today. It was celebrated as a fall harvest festival, and people built little booths or tents that recalled the way they had dwelt during their wilderness wanderings and their arrival in the land flowing with milk and honey. The days and nights were filled with singing and dancing and ceremonies in which priests carried water from the pool of Siloam to pour in the temple. It was also a feast of lights, as four great menorahs were set up in the temple, so that "there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light of the House of Water Drawing" (*Mishnah*).

Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem to celebrate this feast is narrated earlier in the Gospel (7:2); he remains there through the feast of the Dedication (Hanukkah, Jn. 10:21). Throughout, Jesus engages in long debates about his identity and relation to the Mosaic Law. Today's Gospel is a narrative commentary on Jesus' earlier claims that he is the life-giving water (7:35-38) and the light of the world (8:12, see 9:5). Jesus' action of healing the man is an act of releasing God's light and love into this man's life. It is not about our explanations of sin and pain. It is about our openness to the light and love of God. It is about who Jesus is. Yet, we tend to domesticate the power of God's light and love to fit our limited ways of understanding.

I recently read a book that opened a new door for me to understand the power of God's light and love. The book's title is "*Radical Amazement*" and is written by Judy Cannato. In it Cannato explores the science and mysteries of the universe as a way for us to see God's presence. One image that I love the most in her book is that of the sun giving birth to the earth. She says that, "One of the most awe-evoking moments in Earth's evolution came three billion years ago when a simple primitive cell mutated and began to capture light from the sun in a process we call photosynthesis... Virtually all of the oxygen we breathe is thought to result from photosynthesis... Each second the sun converts four million tons of its mass into energy in the form of light. Four million tons of sun is given over each second, never to be recaptured, and as a result, we live. The generosity of the sun is constant, bathing the earth constantly in light. Like a loving parent, she endlessly gives not only all that she has but all that she is so that her offspring may flourish. Photosynthesis is earth's way of receiving the offer, and her response creates an intimate bond between herself and the sun. As I reflect on photosynthesis, I am drawn to consider the Incarnation – that definitive event in Christianity in which divine life spilled over into human life in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Looking at the incarnation through the dual lenses of evolution and the interaction of photosynthesis offers a new clarity about who Jesus is and his meaning for all creation. Since time began the Holy One has been radiating light toward Earth in one continuous act of grace. God's self-communication began with the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago... What Jesus began to teach about the divine energy is that it is inclusive, that in its radiant presence it embraces all that is... And as we engage the Holy mystery, we reflect more of its true nature –we incorporate Light into our being, and begin to radiate in a way that nourishes those around us with the breath of the Spirit. We become compassion and service, wisdom and grace, and inclusive love that flows out of the experience of connectedness that is our essence."

Love is the measure and guide in life. There is no limit on God's love: Our practices and rules are only ways to connect. In the face of tragedy, poverty, world hunger and innocent suffering, we tend to focus on blaming someone for the problem or why something has happened, but the story today calls for a different response. That's what the disciples did in facing blindness. A more appropriate response is to release God's love to others. We are invited to allow Christ's light and love into our pain and suffering. Instead of blaming, what if we responded with love and care? What if we didn't calculate the possibilities of the future? What if we released the power of Christ's light into the situation? What if we used our ability for "photosynthesis?" What if we spent more time absorbing the light of Christ in our lives so that we can radiate it to others? This is our invitation as part of living in the heart. This is what prayer is about.

So, some of you might be asking, "If it is so simple, then why do we not get it?" In his book, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Gerald May says "One might reasonably ask, if we're made of love, filled with love, and meant for love, why do we feel so separate and behave so destructively? According to John [of the Cross] and Teresa [of Avila], there are two fundamental reasons. The first...: we are asleep to the truth; we do not realize who we are and what we are for. The second reason is that we misplace our love; we become attached to things other than God."

I invite you this week as you check in with your heart to focus on how you receive God's light in your life, remembering that this is not just about personal piety. Our time in prayer and in receiving God's light in our lives is essential for our healing and the healing of the whole world.

There is a story of a wise old Rabbi who instructed his students by asking questions. He asked, "How can a person tell when the darkness ends and the day begins?" After thinking for a moment, one student replied, "It is when there is enough light to see an animal in the distance and be able to tell if it is a sheep or a goat." Another student ventured, "It is when there is enough light to see a tree, and tell if it is a fig or an oak tree." The old Rabbi gently said, "No. It is when you can look into someone's face and recognize him/her as your brother or sister. For if you cannot recognize in another's face the face of your brother or sister, the darkness has not yet begun to lift, and the light has not yet come."

Christ is the light of the world. We are here to learn to practice receiving and giving the light of God and the best form of doing that is through learning to receive and give the power of love. May it be so! Amen.