

I am growing increasingly uncomfortable with the “therapeutic” model of doing church. There are different images, different models of being the church. We could think of the church as a learning community – a “teaching” model – with everything geared around studying scripture or understanding theology. Increasingly there is talk of the “mission” model – where the church makes all its decisions around being useful in mission, aiming toward particular ends. Our Presbytery even has a new associate executive for “missional development.” I’ve certainly seen churches, especially smaller ones, that operate on the model of the church as a large extended family. What model do you think organizes us?

The therapeutic model seems to me the one most prevalent in our culture. It is in the language; for example someone may say, “I go to church because it makes me feel better.” Or, “My week just doesn’t go right if I don’t get to church.” Or we may say a certain congregation is a “healthy church.” There are congregations whose organizing principle is to give people peace of mind, make them feel better about themselves and the world. My issue with “church as therapy” is that it assumes that everyone and every system is unhealthy. And you hear people say as much. “Every family is a dysfunctional family.” Nonsense.

The therapeutic model is not all bad. We certainly do some of that, in our prayers for each other when there is illness or suffering, in our pastoral care. But it is not the only way to be a faith community, and it may often get in the way of faithfulness.

Even when Jesus healed the man born blind, that thinking got in the way, although in those days they called it sin. “Who sinned,” asked the disciples. “This man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Religion in Jesus’ time thought that way, and on more than one occasion in the gospels we find Jesus correcting that error. “Neither,” said Jesus, and (in Koester’s translation), “but in order that all the works of God might be revealed in him, we must do the work of him who sent me while it is day.” (9:3-4)<sup>1</sup> Sometimes sin *may* cause suffering, but not necessarily so. Some things just happen. But you can still hear that theological view today, when people look around for someone or something to blame. Remember Jerry Falwell’s famous assertion that AIDS is God’s punishment for sin. “Who sinned, this man, or his parents?” Neither, said Jesus, and you’re asking the wrong question.

Today it is illness and not sin that is our dominant metaphor and driving purpose. Stanley Hauerwas writes about the place of modern medicine in our lives, with its main category of “illness” which has replaced how the medieval cathedral talked about “sin.”<sup>2</sup> We have great cathedrals here in Birmingham – UAB, St. Vincent’s, Trinity, etc.,

monuments not to what we most love but what we most fear, and even Byzantine (says Hauerwas) in the ways power is used and decisions are made.

Jesus only appears in this Gospel lesson at the beginning and the end. First, he healed the man born blind, in a way reminiscent of the second Creation story in Genesis, giving him new eyes made from mud. He answered the disciples question by directing them to the glory of God rather than the casting of blame. Then a nearly slapstick comedy took place, with a debate about whether it was the same man or not. The witnesses don't agree, the Pharisees didn't agree. It's a story with some irony – first they assumed the blindness is the result of sin, but when he wasn't blind anymore, they dragged him in front of the court as if he had done something wrong in being healed! His very health had become an affront to them! They fished for the details, interviewed witnesses, charged Jesus with healing, that is, working, on the Sabbath (making clay), and finally argue with the newly healed man – “You didn't experience what you thought you did. We're the authorities here and we know.” The blind man was a courageous truth-teller who wouldn't be intimidated. He had no need to philosophize or theologize, but simply told his experience. Although he did finally lose patience and dripping sarcasm, said, “I already told you and you wouldn't listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Oh, I know! You want to become his disciples too!” (That wasn't what they wanted. And they didn't like being laughed at.)

We don't always see things the way God sees. That is the point in our Old Testament lesson, the story where Samuel went to Bethlehem to anoint a new King. God sent him to choose one of Jesse's sons. Tall, handsome Eliab was not the one, and the whole parade of 7 sons was rejected, until they sent for the youngest, the afterthought, David. The 8<sup>th</sup> son (one more than the “complete” number, 7, in Hebrew numerology) is something new, something not seen before. And indeed he would become Israel's greatest and legendary King. At that time he was young. No credentials. But God's eye is on not just the individual, but all of Israel as a community, and as Paul said, “God chooses what is weak in the world”(1 Cor. 1:27). Surely we'd have elected Eliab, just as they thought then, choosing for the wrong reasons. Humans look on outward appearance. God looks on the heart.

The role of faith is not always to give people peace of mind. It might do so. Or it might discomfort them. What happened to the “religious” people, in both of the scripture stories from today's lectionary, is that they were discomforted because God's ways are not our ways. The Pharisees' preconceived notions of how God works, even how the world works, were shaken to the core. To keep their worldview intact, they had to disregard clear evidence. They were so tied to their own ideology that they could not believe their own, or anyone's, experience. You can hear them: “The facts simply *must* fit what I already believe!” They're nearly the only ones (besides Jesus) in the story who are not confused, and they're *wrong*.

Most Pharisees aren't mean-spirited people. They sincerely are sure that they know all the answers and can judge for others what's best for them. So they're not shy about telling you what you ought to be doing, or that you are believing the wrong things. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that such folks usually love God and maybe even think they're protecting you. She says that when we're occupied with ritual purity and preserving the rules we fail to see what really matters.<sup>3</sup>

And maybe we are too often the Pharisees, as Drew's favorite rock band sings: No one is blinder than he who will not see. No one is blinder than me."<sup>4</sup> At the end of the episode, Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." That time the Pharisees at least understood what was being said: "Are you saying we're blind?" And Jesus said, "Because you say, 'We see', your sin remains." Their blindness was not literal, but real, and willful. The world had turned upside down.

You may have heard of Seasonal Affective Disorder – SAD, an appropriate acronym – which affects people in winter where there is little sunlight. The highest incidence is in Alaska; no surprise there. One effective treatment is to sit for a period each day under one of those natural light bulbs. You see the metaphor – get into the light.

That is what John the Gospel writer wants us to do. Jesus made the blind man a new creation, and just like at creation, "Let there be light." Jesus is the light of the world not because we cling tenaciously to our doctrines and ideologies, but when we let him be God's Word to us in person.

In John's Gospel, "sin" is not singular, not a list of things you should or should not do, but a condition of relationship – broken relationship. Salvation is life lived in relationship with God. Unlike the other gospel-writers, John puts less emphasis on Jesus' death as the expiation for our sin, and more on the incarnation. *The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.*

God came among us as human and made human life holy. God must have thought that humankind, which is you people, is the most beloved thing there is. And what have humans done in response to that amazing love? Torn apart the church over abstractions of doctrine... discounted and dismissed stories and experiences that don't fit the preferred ideology...loved our ideas about what people ought to do more than we loved the people.

All those models of doing church are valid, and are part of what we do. But at the core I would want a sacramental model. Where our church community can regularly be a "thin place", a liminal space, where heaven seeps through and we encounter God.

I imagine passages like this one can be frustrating, even annoying, to those who are literally losing or have lost their vision. It could be so to those with other health afflictions, mental torments, or trouble in the soul. What about me? Where is Jesus for

me? This is the point of this gospel. If we would have it, there is nothing in the universe that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:39). In those sacramental moments – cleansed and claimed by baptismal waters, fed at the table, or in those “unofficial” sacramental moments where you know you are in the presence of the Holy, all unflattering distinctions vanish and the world itself is redefined, transformed. My friend Karl Travis says about this text that Christians are people learning to see the world as God sees it. In this case, believing is seeing.

Everyone who comes to this table has their own experience, an affair of the heart with the Lord of life. Jesus got down in the mud, got down in the water, came down in the bread and wine, came into human life and all things ordinary, to restore relationship to all that is sacred, to God. In a sacramental community, that restores us to one another. When we are really fed with this bread and wine, and Christ is in us, we will not lose sight of what matters, and we will love those whom God loves, and welcome those whom God welcomes. We are welcomed there as well. Thanks be to God.

<sup>1</sup> Koester, Craig Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel, Fortress Press, 2003, p. 105

<sup>2</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley *Sinsick*, p.9, Sin, Death & the Devil, edited by Braaten, Carl & Jensen, Robert, Erdman's Publishing, Grand Rapids, 1999)

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown Home By Another Way, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1999

<sup>4</sup> U2, *I Threw a Brick Through a Window*, 1983