

Sermons from Park Hill: March 2, 2008

Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado

Rev. Dr. David Bahr
pastor@parkhillchurch.org

March 2, 2008

John 9: 1-41
"The Blame Game"

The blame game. Who can we blame? I mentioned to you last week: Lawrence King, a 15 year old student in Oxnard, California, was shot in the head while sitting in school by another 14 year old boy a few weeks ago. Lawrence had been a frequent target for bullying because he had started wearing mascara, lipstick, and jewelry to school.¹ This teenager's search for his identity "freaked out the other boys."² Officials have labeled it a hate crime.

¹ Boy's Killing, Labeled a Hate Crime, Stuns a Town, NY Times, February 23, 2008

² Associated Press, February 15, 2008. This quote and following message board comments found on FreeRepublic.com

It always seems like a mistake to read the message boards from incidents like this because, not surprisingly, at least the one I read, the respondents focused almost exclusively on two things: 1) if you want to dress like a sissy, you should expect to get beaten – "he got what he deserved" - and 2) this was big, by calling it a hate crime, they claimed the *victim* is getting *preferential* treatment because if he had been straight, they wouldn't be going after the shooter so hard - the victim is further victimized. Those are the two most frequent moves in the blame game.

Who can we blame? Was it the blind man's sin or the parent's of the blind man who sinned that caused the man to be blind? He must have deserved it. And later, instead of asking the blind man, everyone talks to everyone else *about* him. Further marginalizing the marginalized.

The recent tragedy of Lawrence King reminded me of the "gay panic" defense used by Matthew Shepherd's murderers. According to this theory, the killers were so distressed by an alleged "come-one" by skinny little effeminate Matthew that they had to beat him senseless and hang him from a fence to teach him a lesson. That is, until they changed their story and it wasn't gay panic. The "real reason" was that it was simply a robbery gone bad. You see, their prison sentence shouldn't have been so harsh because you couldn't really blame them for targeting a gay man. Even though

Sermons from Park Hill: March 2, 2008

they'll still say that Matthew should have known better. The blame game.

Today we continue our wilderness walk through Lent. So far on our journey we met Nicodemus two weeks ago, an unnamed Samaritan woman last week, and today a man born blind.

Nicodemus was a man of status and standing in the community. He had authority and respect as a Pharisee, someone with great learning but who could not understand. He came to Jesus in the night seeking insight but was told he could not see the kingdom of God without being born from above; he couldn't understand without looking at it in a radical and completely new way. The idea of the kingdom of God was just so different than what Nicodemus thought it was supposed to be that he walked away puzzled. The rich man walked away empty that dark night.

Last week Jesus met a woman at the well at noon, during the hottest and loneliest part of the day. She was there all alone because she was an outcast – rejected by the others in the village because of her past and present circumstances – you might even say, her “lifestyle.” She had had five husbands and was now living with a man outside the bounds of “traditional” marriage. And we are so curious: what had she done to them to cause them all to leave her (she must

have deserved it). She must have been quite a... problem (further marginalizing her). The blame game. As an aside, it's likely that at least one of the men, or more, would have been her first husband's brother – who would have been legally obligated to marry her if she had not produced a male heir for the first brother. Traditional marriage in the Bible is often much more shocking than anything we have today.

Anyway, she couldn't believe Jesus would talk to her. For one, she was a woman, and it was against the law for male and female strangers to speak in public; she was a Samaritan, which meant her people were the mutual enemies of Jesus' people; but it was this checkered past and present – not someone with whom Jesus was “supposed” to associate – that was so scandalous.

Jesus knew all this and, I believe *because* he knew all this about her, he *chose* her to reveal that he is the Messiah – something he had not yet told anyone else. She was exactly the kind of person Jesus was looking for to demonstrate that the kingdom of God is the upside-down version of what people think it's supposed to be. And when she was invited to receive Living Water, instead of keeping it to herself like she might have deserved to do, she shared it with the very people who had despised her. This humble woman was lifted up; the rich man didn't get it and walked away empty. And she played the blame game in reverse.

Sermons from Park Hill: March 2, 2008

We might think that on the social-respectability ladder that a “girls behaving badly” Samaritan woman would be on the bottom rung. But today’s encounter goes another step deeper. People thought that disabilities could be a sign of sin *so significant* that it could be passed to another generation. Perhaps worse than that, they feared them, as though physical contact could transfer blindness to someone else. The disciples point this out. Because of that fear, the man is treated as an object of conversation and pity, tolerated as a beggar – a proper position for him in society. And, again, people kept talking *about* him instead of talking *to* him. Several times they have to be reminded – he can speak. As his parents also remind, he is of age, although they may have said that to deflect attention away from them, scared of the wrath of the powerful.

In fact, even Jesus interacts with the man without asking first if he wanted to be healed. And he doesn’t explain what he’s doing. Jesus simply put spit and mud on the man’s eyes and then sends him off. But did you also notice that Jesus didn’t ask if he had enough faith to believe. His healing wasn’t dependent on his faith or lack of faith, sin or no sin. The man simply receives sight. Which then, ironically, blinded those who could see. Another reversal. Another humble one lifted up; more “rich” ones become empty. Do you see the theme?

Jesus goes on to teach that blindness, or any disability, is not caused by sin. But the way people *react* can cause them to go blind. The Pharisees became spiritually blind. By giving sight to the blind man, Jesus changes the status quo. He turns things upside down – again. And therefore he becomes yet another threat to the authority of the powerful. Watch out for all the shattering egos. Jesus just keeps getting more dangerous as he continues to include more and more people who had previously been outcasts for whatever religious, cultural, political, or moral reasons. Each time he reduces the power of those in control. Each time it becomes more clear that anyone who has been excluded for religious reasons or who had violated cultural norms is lifted up in the kingdom of God – a reversal of the status quo.

The readings from the Gospel of John during Lent present ever increasingly difficult things to understand and accept (wait until next week!). He keeps calling into question the ways things are supposed to be. John is preparing us for the resurrection, the ultimate setting aside of preconceived notions about what is possible in God’s kingdom. But, it’s also about the shattering of existing barriers and boundaries between people now. The outcasts keep being lifted up; the powerful keep being put down a notch.

The Pharisees are so sure they know all there is to know. And so they become blind.

Sermons from Park Hill: March 2, 2008

They are so sure of what is possible, they can't believe in God's power – and these are the religious authorities! Jesus keeps changing the rules of the game. It's not now "won" by those who keep the purity laws the best, who know every punishment for the abominations, but those who show the greatest and most scandalous acts of compassion.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her book *A Tale of Two Heretics* writes about the Pharisees: "They were so sure of everything: that God did not work on the Sabbath, that Moses was God's only spokesman, that anyone born blind had to be a sinner and ditto for anyone who broke the Sabbath, that God did not work through sinners, that God did not work *on* sinners, and that furthermore no one could teach them anything. Meanwhile, the man born blind, wasn't sure about anything. And he was the one who eventually saw the light. It was the one and only thing he was absolutely sure about: I was blind and now I see. If that made Jesus a heretic, then he sincerely hoped he would be allowed to become one too."

I've been reading a lot about what constitutes a Progressive Christian for my conversation group in April. Progressives are often called heretics by those with a more traditional, orthodox understanding of Christianity, defenders of the faith – who, once again, seem more concerned with the social respectability of the church than its critique of society and its own practices. I

always consider the threat of heresy to be a sign that I'm going in the right direction. One of the best compliments I ever received was by a man who said my ordination signalled the end of Christianity as we know it. But I think Christianity *as we know it* is exactly the problem. God is always doing new things that we refuse to see. We shouldn't act like the Pharisees who are blind to a reversal to how we believe things are supposed to be. In fact, what is one thing that you know the church is supposed to be about? What is the one way worship is supposed to be? Are you open to a possible reversal of that way?

Although with limited human vision and imagination, when I look at Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God, I see these as the recurring theme: Welcome the outcast. Raise up the powerless. Let those who have been silenced speak. End the blame game and simply have compassion.

I don't know why this continues to elude the Church. A woman from Samaria with a questionable past is given the honor of knowing Jesus' identity before anyone else, and goes and proclaims this to and saves her whole village, but she can't preach from the majority of pulpits in the world today. Why? I don't know why victims of abuse continue to be blamed. I don't know why some acts of religiously-justified hatred and violence are acceptable, and by their silence even encouraged. I don't know why the earth continues to be exploited, despite

Sermons from Park Hill: March 2, 2008

being tasked with its stewardship and care. I don't know why the lobbyists continue to have so much power over the needs of the people when the vulnerable are the very people we are supposed to protect. I don't know why so many Christians don't want to embrace Jesus' radical message of change to the status quo, an upending of exclusion based on old purity laws for the sake of radical compassion.

Or maybe I do know why, or at least suspect. But I shouldn't first seek to blame everyone else – since the first person I might look at is me. What can't I see about myself? What are my power issues? I should look for my own bias before blaming someone else for theirs. Because self-examination is the heart of Lent.