

Converting Some Sinners  
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"Converting Some Sinners" Pilgrim Church UCC, March 26, 2017, (John 9:1-41) Fourth Sunday in Lent

There's a story that one day God was contemplating the earth and all of humanity and saw all of our bad behaviors. So God called one of God's angels and sent the angel to earth to scout out the situation and report back to God. The angel returned and told God, "Yeah, it's pretty bad right now. I'd say that 95% of people are misbehaving and only 5% of people are behaving as you instructed." So God thought for awhile and decided to send another angel for a second opinion. The second angel spent some time among humanity and came back with the same report—people are seriously sinning. 95% of people are misbehaving and only 5% are being nice. Well, God was really disappointed. So God decided to send an e-mail to the 5% of all humanity who were good—to encourage and inspire them to keep up the good work. Do you know what that e-mail said? No? Okay, well I was just wondering—because I didn't get it either.

Most of us are flawed, which means that we sin. Today's Gospel story from John Chapter 9 is full of flawed characters. Today's story has many questions about who is sinning under what circumstances and what does it really mean to have sight.

The disciples earnestly question Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus tells them that neither sinned and heals the man by spitting on the ground, making some mud, rubbing it on his eyes, and sending him to a pool to wash up. But then the Pharisees question the formerly blind man. These leaders argue about Jesus, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." Other Pharisees respond, but "how can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" The man leaves and the Pharisees call him back, "We know that this man [Jesus] is a sinner." The man answers, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." Then the healed man testifies, "I've never heard of anyone who's been able to open the eyes of someone like me who was born blind from birth. If Jesus isn't from God, he couldn't have healed me. Some of the Pharisees don't take this very well, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?'"[1]

Finally, the healed man and Jesus reconnect—he still hadn't seen Jesus since he received the mud concoction and washed in the pool because then everyone started questioning him. Jesus and the healed man finally get to see each other face to face. And the man converts and comes to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, "Lord, I believe." Jesus says for all to hear, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." [2]

For some Christians, speaking about sin makes us almost as uncomfortable as emotive conversions—so let's explore both this morning! Sin first. Sin can be defined as any act, attitude, or course of our lives that betrays the divine intention for us. Sin alienates us from God.[3] The great theologian Paul Tillich defined sin as separation—separation from God, separation from one another, and separation from our best selves. That's always a good definition to keep in mind: sin as separation.

On Communion Sundays and during Lent, we say a unison Prayer of Confession at Pilgrim. In some churches, there is a unison Prayer of Confession every week. At my former church in

Wellesley we said the Prayer of Confession weekly and heard the Summary of the Law—Jesus' commandment to love God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Corporate Confession at the beginning of worship can help us leave our mistakes behind in order to get grounded and real at church. One former parishioner confided in me that some weeks our Prayer of Confession really annoyed him because he felt like he was confessing to sins he didn't commit. But there were other weeks that the Prayer of Confession hit too close to home because he thought, wow, so this week's Confession is really meant for me and that eventually brought him peace.

President of Andover Newton Martin Copenhaver (in a UCC Daily Devotional) wrote that some churches view the Prayer of Confession as too negative. We have many difficulties in our lives, why add to peoples' burdens when they come to church? Yet Copenhaver reminds us, "Confession is not about adding a burden. Quite the opposite. It is about being unburdened. Ultimately, there is no joy in denial. But there can be great joy in receiving forgiveness. As Christians we don't need to traffic in denial. We can afford to be realists."<sup>[4]</sup> This means accepting that we're not perfect and we will have moments where we separate from God, one another, and our best selves. Further, it means that God would be hard pressed to find 5% of humanity who never perform any act, have any attitude, or undertake any course in their lives that betrays what God intends for us.

We hear in John's Gospel all these questions about who sinned: the man born blind or his parents or is Jesus a sinner or the Pharisees? If we define sin as separation—as alienation from God—and if we Christians believe that the divine intention is loving God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself—well, I can't think of anyone who never sins. Maybe you know perfect people, but I sure don't and many of my friends are fellow ministers. Everyone makes mistakes, messes up, gets lost, and needs forgiveness from God. Sometimes we need to reorient our lives by changing our ways and coming back home to God where we belong. This reorientation back to God is the heart of the Holy Season of Lent, and this is where conversion may come into play.

Onto Conversion. It's hard to picture in the middle of a service one Sunday many of us standing up and declaring (like the blind man whose sight is restored): "Lord, I believe." And there is historical precedent for why New England Congregationalists have sometimes been called the Frozen Chosen and why folks may shy away from a public declaration of newfound faith. This religious reserve dates way back but became pronounced after the Revolutionary War. Often we lament modern church membership and the decline of Mainline Protestantism. However in the 1790s, church membership reached an all-time low: only 5-10% of the adult population were church members.<sup>[5]</sup> This abysmal situation sparked the Second Great Awakening in 1795—a religious revival movement with a concern for personal salvation and worldwide Christian renewal.

Congregationalists, Anglicans, and Presbyterians led the First Great Awakening. Methodists, Baptists, and Disciples led the Second. The major difference was that Congregationalists (like Jonathan Edwards in the First Great Awakening) had stressed that sinful people don't have the ability to save ourselves. Personal conversion is critical and necessary, but we have to rely on God to change sinful humanity. Basically, Edwards argued that sinners can't desire to worship and praise God unless God, by a miraculous infusion of grace, changes the very character and nature of the sinner.<sup>[6]</sup>

By the Second Great Awakening, you had ministers who said that God has bestowed on everyone the ability to come to Christ now; it's all on us already. Even though Baptists, Methodists, and Disciples were the mainstays of the Second Great Awakening, one of the key preachers was Presbyterian Minister Charles Grandison Finney. Finney believed that sinners needed to repent now, so used "the anxious bench"—a seating area right up front near the

pulpit reserved for people especially concerned for their souls. And you had better believe that the anxious bench was where the preacher would direct his vigorous, confrontational sermons especially during a revival. It's no wonder New England Congregationalists are known for sitting as far away from the pulpit as humanly possible.

The anxious bench evolved into the altar call—if you are ready to repent of your sins, come forward to be saved. Finney once said, "If you say to [the sinner], 'There is the anxious seat, come out and avow your determination to be on the Lord's side' and if he is not willing to do so small a thing as that, then he is not willing to do anything." [7] One of Finney's detractors was German Reformed minister J.W. Nevin (remember the German Reformed denomination is one of the predecessors of the UCC.) Well Nevin believed the anxious bench put too much emphasis on an individual's actions in conversion and not enough on God's role. Nevin echoed Jonathan Edwards, that God has to infuse some grace and it's not just up to us. He also seemed to have reservations about possible emotional manipulation. Finney retorted to all his detractors that the best defense of the anxious bench was that it worked, thank you very much! [8]

In the end, what we see in our Gospel story is an examination of sins and sinners and ultimately conversion. We see a man worshiping Jesus after he's healed and now can see the light, "Lord, I believe." Sincere conversion or coming into your inherited faith and accepting it as your own, has always been about the partnership between God and us. Sometimes God calls out and we are compelled to answer, other times we may call on God first and surrender to God's love. It's hard to explain conversion—how or why it happens, if God extends an invitation or if God's invitation is already here. Maybe we just celebrate that our religious experiences differ. That there are times when we feel God pulling at our hearts to somehow help God mend the world or that out of sheer silence we may realize that we need God.

Conversions can be messy. Sins are messy. Our very lives are messy. We saw Jesus open someone's eyes by spitting on the ground, making mud with his spit, and then spreading the mud on that man's eyes. Opening up our eyes to the glory of God in our very midst is messy business. But out of the mess and the dirt and the spit and the mud, we can see God as we have never seen God before. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see. Amen.

[1] John 9:2, 16, 24-25, and 34, NRSV.

[2] John 9:38 and 41.

[3] James William McClendon, Jr., "Sin," in *New & Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology*, Donald W. Musser & Joseph L. Price, Eds., 463.

[4] Martin Copenhaver, "Christians are Joyful Sinners," *UCC Stillspeaking Daily Devotional*, March 22, 2014.

[5] Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 163.

[6] Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 96.

[7] Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 176.

[8] *Ibid.*