

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
September 3, 2006
www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

Proof of the Reality of God **John 9: 1-25**

For me, this passage comes with a bitter, searing memory.
I think of a young Kentucky woman dying of cancer, leaving behind a husband and a fourteen-year-old son. She had one of those last, heart-to-heart conversations with one of her best friends, who happened to be our church organist.
To her friend, she spoke the great question that was upon her heart:
“Has God truly provided for me? Is there really any God?
Could our entire Christian faith be a hoax? Could God just be an elaborate lie?”
Life has a way of making us all theologians, and these were questions our organist could not duck, and she answered as best she could, through her tears, but she admitted to me later,
“I don’t know if I spoke to her heart. I did my best, but she wanted certainty, and I don’t blame her.
But how could I provide her with proof of God’s reality?”
To my mind, this is the text that gives an answer to that great question.

Life makes theologians of us all, so it is not surprising that when Jesus’ disciples saw a man who had been blind from birth sitting in his accustomed spot, begging for charity, they asked a cruel but natural question:
“Master, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”
Implicit in the question is the assumption that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people, a commonplace theology that endures to this day.
You can be sure that the blind man, with his acute sense of hearing, heard the question, and no doubt wondered what sin this rabbi might identify that would justify the great burden with which he had been afflicted.

Jesus answered: “His blindness is not caused by his sin or his parents’ sin, but God will use his blindness as an opportunity to make the glory of God manifest.”
An important word: Jesus is not stating here a general theological principle.
Jesus is not saying that every handicap serves as a divine prop for a parable.
Jesus is addressing one man’s situation, one man’s opportunity.
The next thing the blind man heard was the sound of a man spitting. No doubt he cringed out of reflex, having been frequently exposed to vicious and insensitive people throughout his life.
But the spittle hit ground instead. He heard the sound of a man stooping and making a mud pie, then felt his eyes covered with wet, sticky glue. His anger swelled, but he was calmed by the voice of the Master who commanded, “Go. Wash in the pool called Sent.”

You know what happens next. He went, he washed, and he could see. He could see!
A barrage of images from the surrounding market place gave shape to sounds that he had known for years. *He could see!* But this was no pollyanna miracle.
The moment the blind man was transformed by God’s healing power, that’s when his troubles *really* started. His very presence touched off an argument among his friends.
Some people said, “Well, he kinda looks like the guy born blind.” Others argued, “No, it is really him.”
When the blind man established that indeed, he was the man born blind, everyone demanded that he go show himself to the religious authorities,

but the servants of the sacred, who were supposed to deal in matters of spiritual transformation, were even more skeptical about the man's healing than were the man's friends.

"Who healed you? It can't be Jesus. Give God the praise. This Jesus must be a sinner, for this is the Sabbath, and no holy man would heal on the Sabbath."

Bewildered, exasperated, the blind man said one of the most remarkable statements ever uttered:

"Whether he is a sinner or not, I do not know. But one thing I do know: I was blind, but now I see."

"Whether or not he is a sinner I do not know. But one thing I do know. I once was blind. But now I see."

This, my friends, is the only compelling proof of God's reality that speaks convincingly to our heart.

The only compelling proof that we have to offer the world of God's reality is our testimony of having experienced the reality of God's power in our own lives.

The only truly convincing word of God's reality that we can speak to others is when we say,

"I was guilty, and God's grace forgave me. I was weak and God's power strengthened me.

I was forlorn and God's promise gave me a future. I was blind, but God's grace illumined me.

I was hopeless, but in the depths of my despair God came and filled my life with light."

Personal testimony of our own experience of God is the most moving proof of God that we can offer.

I think of Harry Emerson Fosdick's striking observation about a greatly troubled man:

"His problem," said Fosdick, "was that he lacked any invisible means of support."

I know what he meant.

I have seen a great many people in moments of crisis who could summon no inner resources, who had no source of spiritual character. Their inner emptiness could not withstand the pressure

of the outside world. Their spiritual inadequacy amidst the crucible of crisis was terrifying to behold.

But I have also seen the other side of the equation.

I have witnessed a great many people who have experienced what that blind man experienced.

In the depth of their being they have known the reality of God.

I have seen evidence of that experience in the fortitude they displayed when given a terminal diagnosis.

I have seen it in the peace they exuded in a hospice unit as they said goodbye to loved ones.

I have seen it in the joy two people brought to a marriage altar as they made heroic promises of love.

I have seen it in the freedom someone experienced when God's power freed him from an addiction.

I have seen it in the wonder and courage with which a couple accepted the challenge of raising new life. In

such moments of crisis and triumph, people often give evidence of an invisible but real Presence

that nourished and sustained them. They have had the experience of the blind man.

They know of God's reality because God's reality has irrevocably touched the center of their being.

Indeed, this ninth chapter of John stands at the center of my own faith.

How could I pray with you in your hospital rooms, how could I bring you cookies when you celebrate the joy of a new arrival, how could I stand at this altar and help you solemnize your wedding vows,

how could I stand in this pulpit at your funeral and say with integrity,

"Our Christ is the Resurrection and the Life!" -- unless my testimony was that of the blind man?

In those lonely pit moments of my life, on the mountain top of success, in the abyss of despair,

I have been acutely aware of the Reality of a Presence.

I have known in the center of my being that there is an Unseen Source to whom I can turn.

It is only on the basis of that experience that I can fulfill the demands of my calling.

I was blind but now I see. I *am* blind, but by God's grace I am learning to see.

I *will be* blind, but I trust that by God's power I will be enabled to see in the future.

I think of my old friend and mentor Dr. Frank Tupper, who not long after the loss of his wife to cancer participated in a theological colloquium with me.

With a broken heart, Frank made a statement that I can hear as clearly now as when he said it decades ago: “On the basis of external evidence, I could almost be moved to say that there is no God. And yet I know that I have been changed by God’s grace.”

Even in his anguish and his anger, though part of his being wanted to say, “God is a lie,” he knew that such a statement would be untrue to his experience of life and faith.

In his pit – even in his pit! – the reality of God’s presence had touched him and changed him and made him a different person.

There come certain moments in everybody’s life where they must opt for one two choices: they will either close themselves off to the possibility of the transcendent, in which case their spirit will wither and their inner life will die, no matter how long their material body survives; or, they will open themselves to the reality of the divine and in so doing will find newness of life.

Once God has truly touched you, you have found a Reality that you cannot deny, a Reality that you cannot forget, and for which you will forevermore hunger and thirst.

Some years ago, I picked up the newspaper and starting reading an article on a blood-clot dissolving wonder drug called TPA. I deemed the article interesting.

That very afternoon the doctors in Augusta, Georgia, used TPA for the first time to save the life of one of my good friends, who had suffered a near-fatal heart attack at age thirty-six.

I didn’t need to read the rest of the article on TPA.

Nothing could tell me about the power of that drug like the experience of having it save my friend’s life.

You can read about God. You can talk about God.

But nothing makes you know the nature of God like experiencing God in the depth of your soul and being healed by God’s grace.

A church is not a collection of righteous people. Lord knows, it is not a collection of perfect people.

A church is a collection of those who share the experience of having been touched by God,

who can say together, “I was blind, but now I see.

I am still blind, but by God’s grace, I am trying to see.”

I will be blind in the future, but I trust that God will empower me – and not just me, but all who are open to God’s piercing and penetrating power -- to see in the future.”

This is a church: a congregation of people who share a similar experience of illumination.

This passage actually comes not with just memory, but with two, not just the sad story of that Kentucky woman, but of a seminary artist-in-residence, with whom I struck up a close friendship.

One day he told me his remarkable story.

He was a playwright and actor whose first Broadway play opened and closed in one night. Not good.

In the wake of that failure he decided that his life was worthless, and he decided that the only thing for him to do was to go to the ocean and swim as far out as his strength would take him.

Then he would drown.

So he began to swim, laboring out into the sea. But as he began to swim, one thought throbbed in his mind, a phrase he could not expel. Swimming though he might, he kept hearing these words:

“God is love. God is love. God is love. God is love. God is love. God is love” –

an incessant pulse within his brain.

The longer he swam, the more captivating that phrase became.

Suddenly the thought split him like lightning: “It’s true: “God is love. God is. God *is*.”

He found the strength, literally, to turn his life around, and swim back toward shore.

A month or so later he wrote the lyrics to the best-selling youth musical of all time, ironically entitled, “Celebrate Life.” My friend’s name is Ragan Courtney, and the climax of his musical is

a resurrection anthem that features one recurring refrain: “He is alive! He is alive! He *is* alive!”
Such is the testimony of one who was blind, but who now can see.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I am found. I was blind . . . but now I see. “
May that be our testimony. May that be our proof.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
September 3, 2006