

Life from the Dirt

The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church - Brunswick, ME

Sunday, March 26, 2017

Scripture: [John 9:1-17](#)

Introduction to the Scripture

We're continuing this week with a series of personal encounters with Jesus. In the weeks previous, we met Nicodemus the elder, then a Samaritan woman at a well, and now we'll meet a man born blind.

Of all these intimate stories of conversations with Jesus we've been reading, this is when he starts getting particularly Jesus-y. He encounters the blind man, and I'll spoil the ending: the man can see at the end of the story. But the ingredients to that healing and clarity of sight are really the point of this story, laid out so that he can see, and be seen... so pay attention to what gets seen, and where there is dirt, what gets called dirty.

Sermon

We don't know the whole story of this man Jesus meets. We don't know what formed him, but simply that—from birth—he has had to exist close to the ground, literally in the dirt, because of his disability. If you continue on, we'll even meet his parents, they get called to testify in what is a 30 verse investigation into how this man could come to see and why. But even they don't seem to know too much about him.

It's not about a healing. I'm gonna leave the healthcare to the universal healthcare group after worship. In fact, this story is remarkable because the man doesn't ask to be healed. This story gets started because people always have to be worrying about sin, and Jesus always has to be showing how we worry about the wrong sins all the time.

The disciples ask the question: "Who sinned? The man, or his parents?" Their world view is one where bad things always happen for a reason, and the reason had to be this man—born blind, so he would have to have been 'no good' somehow before he even was—or maybe the explanation was that he was the product of his parents' wrong-doing. This view is so common that, after he has been healed, none of the neighbors and townspeople can even believe that this is the same man.

The religious authorities first don't believe it either, and then they switch to trying to find out if Jesus sinned in some way by doing the healing... And in the middle of it all, is a person telling his story... I wonder if he giggled to himself as he did... somehow I suspect this is about as much attention as any person had ever paid him.

We would like to say that our worldview has changed. Too often, we fall into traps of made-up cosmologies of justice. Setting up "God from on high" laying out the blue prints for the floors below... and the closer you get to the ground... well, we know that's not good. We are far too glad to connect

someone's pain, or grief, or poverty to some failing on their part... That they ended up in the dirt because they're dirty in some way. Maybe it scares us and reminds us of close we all are to those places ourselves.

We also divide the levels of lives. This is what is at stake in our conversations about accessibility and inclusion... will we, as a society, insist on a kind of vertical division of our lives... sometimes even literally. I have been spending a lot more time with the Americans with Disabilities Act. I have been realizing that this is not simply a question of where people can go... but a question of how we see each other... honor the stories and the ground on which each of us stands. See, this man was blind, but really? No one saw him, that's the wrong in this story.

Jesus mixes up this weird recipe of dirt and spit and rubs it on his eyes and tells him to go wash and see. If you were from Jesus's time, you recognize the mud and dirt and spit part as folk magic. Jesus doesn't do this sort of thing, but here he does: he meets the blind man where he is.

Jesus reclaims the value of our whole stories, our whole lives, everything that has grounded us as part of our vision of the holy. And he's not afraid to use the dirt under our feet to help us see it. If you read on, in the end, the man—exhausted finally says I don't know anything about Jesus, I just know I once was blind but now I see. His story, his testimony.

On May 6 and 7, Dr. Diana Butler Bass will be here as part of our 300th anniversary celebrations. She'll be talking to us about what she's seeing changing as a sociologist and church historian as religion and faith turn a corner into another era. Her most recent book is called *Grounded: Finding God in the World - A Spiritual Revolution*.

Above all else, she uses the book to talk about the wide variety of ways in which humanity is experiencing a profound shift from a vertical cosmology: From God, heaven, earth, hell in a morality layer-cake that keeps every other layer out from the other... to an understanding and practice that the holy is woven into and close to everything that is. She starts at the ground floor: dirt and water... and finds people in and out of church reconnecting themselves to holiness where they had thought God was only 30,000 feet up.

It is, as it turns out, amazing what God can do with dirt.

We must abandon the external height images in which the theistic God has historically been perceived and replace them with internal depth images of a deity who is not apart from us, but who is the very core and ground of all that is. —Paul Tillich ^[1]

Well, that all sounds lovely, but where can we see that turn lived out?

The Brunswick High School Players just put on *Les Miserables* which is not an easy thing for professionals to do, so let me just tell you... they were super impressive. I was reminded again of the earth shaking cosmological change laid out for us to listen to and watch: Inspector Javert who spends his life certain of the vertical nature of God, and judgment, and justice... and is undone by just that system. Then you have Valjean whose sense of justice and righteousness is informed and expanded and changed by the connection he finds with individuals over and over again.

To Javert, God hands down justice from on high, as orderly and clean as the clockworks of the stars. Valjean grounded-ness, his human-ness leads him on and on the path of life until he leaves life with the crescendo revelation: "To love another person is to see the face of God."

We are reminded today that the face of God sees *us*, that Christ comes and loves human with all their hummus, their earthy-ness, uses the very earth beneath our feet and stories the pasts that ground us.

Today, we give thanks for new members, with whom we made promises today to share in the ground of all being with. Welcome. Don't be afraid to bring your whole selves here.

We are thankful for all the stories that have been the rich soil that nourished you, nurtured you, and then brought you to be planted here with us. I hope you find this a community of deep vision, and that you help us to see you, and see the world as you have and do know it. And we thank you for the chance to meet you face to face, and see even more clearly the face of God, alive, and working in our midst. Amen.

1. Bass, Diana Butler (2015-10-06). *Grounded: Finding God in the World-A Spiritual Revolution* (p. 31). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition. ↩