

“All I Know Is”

John 9: 1-41

The Fourth Sunday of Lent, (April 3) 2011

Kyle Childress

One of my favorite things to listen while I’m driving is *Car Talk*. Most of you know it, and for many of you it’s your favorite too. For those who don’t know, it is on Saturday mornings and repeated on Sunday afternoons on NPR. Two brothers, Tom and Ray, also known as Click and Clack, run a garage in Cambridge, MA and they take phone calls on the air from callers who describe their car and whatever is wrong and Tom and Ray diagnose it and tell the caller how to get the car fixed. Of course, what makes it fun is the banter back and forth between the two brothers. At the same time, over the years, I’ve learned a lot about car problems and repairs just by listening to them. For all of their wit and sense of humor, these guys know cars. But they don’t theorize; they don’t make big pronouncements, and they’re not interested in general issues about cars or the automobile industry. They are interested in the details of the caller’s specific make and model of car, exactly what seems to be wrong, and their answers are specific, particular, and detailed.

Tom and Ray and *Car Talk* are a lot like the Bible and our reading this morning from John 9. The Bible is not much on sweeping pronouncements. Jesus in the gospels has very little patience with Big Ideas or generalizations but cares a lot about the mundane details people’s lives, especially people who are in need. And John chapter 9 gives us the specifics of the life of a man who has been blind since birth and his encounter with Jesus with the details of the fallout and repercussions he meets as a result.

The disciples are in a theological argument about a man they meet who has been blind since he was born. From what we can tell, they're not having a conversation with the man; they're talking about him in front of him. They are not interested in him; they want to debate an issue of theodicy – the theology of suffering. They ask Jesus, “Who sinned that caused this man to be blind? Are his parents responsible or is he?”

Who caused the tsunami? Who caused the earthquake? Sometimes we can answer questions of tragedy but oftentimes we can't. In the Old Testament there are some places where there is some connection between sin and tragedy, sin and sickness. But Jesus shows no interest in their theoretical discussion; he does not care to fix blame. He says, “I don't know. But I do know this. Let's see what God can do.”

So Jesus bends over and mixes spittle and dirt to form a paste which he puts on the man's eyes and then has the man go wash in the nearby pool. The man does so and now he is able to see. He can see but his troubles have just begun. And Jesus departs from the scene, not to be heard from again until the very end of the story.

Is the man's appearance after the healing so drastically changed that the neighbors cannot recognize him? He keeps having to identify himself, “I am the man. Yes, I'm the same man you all have known for so many years as blind.” Perhaps they had so stereotyped him as merely “a blind man,” that they cannot conceive of him in his new condition. They keep quizzing him; they keep asking him (v. 11) what is going on; what happened. The work of Jesus has caused a large amount of “cognitive dissonance” as the social scientist might put it. They can't fix

the man's present state within their field of reference. They can't explain, with their conventional categories, just what has happened here.

The man's parents are summoned (vv. 18-23). They, seeing the controversy the healing has caused, are reluctant to answer. The Pharisees are the religious experts here, those who feel an authorization to try to sort out just what has happened. But no one wants to give credit to Jesus. No one wants to admit that some new and uncontained power is loose here.

One might have thought that there would be jubilation that a blind man now sees. Instead, there is controversy and dangerous dissension. The religious authorities, the keepers of revelation, seem to sense that they may be in danger of losing their grip on the movements of God. They can't have some uncredentialed, unaccredited miracle worker roaming about without their authorization!

If this wasn't so painful to read and to hear, it would almost be a chaotic comic scene from an old Marx Brothers' movie, with the townspeople all in heated debate if this is the man they've known for so long as blind, and the parents are denying any responsibility while the religious leaders are arguing and yelling, accusing and defending. And in the middle of it all, the man stands there, still not fully understanding what's happened. "I don't know. I don't know how I can see. A man named Jesus rubbed a paste on my eyes, I went and washed in the pool, and now I can see. No, I don't know where he is."

His family takes him back to the religious leaders, who grill him again. They discover that Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath! "Aha! Now we have something we know about. This happened on the Sabbath, therefore this man Jesus is not of God."

My friend Cindy Weber is the pastor of Jefferson Street Baptist Chapel in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. Years ago she baptized two young men. They had been in a gang but they became Christian and wanted to be baptized – from a gang to the church, from a life in crime heading for prison or death to new life in Christ. It so happened that a delegation of folks were visiting from a large conservative church in town. The delegation went back and reported to their church and then to the local Baptist association, that a woman was baptizing. Jefferson Street Baptist Chapel was kicked out of the association because their female pastor baptized. No one ever mentioned the young men who had been converted. No one gave thanks to God.

The religious authorities say to the man, “This Jesus doesn't have a medical degree, is not on the roll of the AMA. Furthermore, he has no formal theological training. He's not credentialed in any of the professional organizations that count. He is a sinner; now admit that he is a sinner.” The now surely bewildered blind man says, “I don't know all that much about sin, salvation, sanctification, theodicy, and all that big religious stuff. The only thing I know is a few days ago I was blind, and now I can see.”

“Tell us one more time, from the start, how did he heal you?”

“Do I have to go over all this again?” he said. “I have never even seen flowers growing. I've never seen the color of the sky. Why can't you let me live into this? If you are so interested in explaining all this, why don't you go ask Jesus yourself? Maybe you want to be one of his disciples.”

This sends the religious authorities into a frenzy. They accuse the man of insulting the one and only true and biblical faith and throw him out of the synagogue.

On his way out, somebody heard the man mumbling to himself, “I didn't even want to get into a theological discussion. All I know is that once I was blind and now I ...”

Isn't this a curious story? I know lots of people who think that they are so open-minded, intellectual, curious, courageously receiving the facts, following the evidence, no matter where it leads. But sometimes, if the facts or the evidence challenge their settled little modern worldview, doesn't fit their preconceptions of what can and what can't be, well, they simply reject it.

Each of us lives in an assumptive world, a realm that is bounded by certain steadfast convictions of what can and cannot be. When something happens, we rush to fit it into our assumptive world. We have a set of boxes, each one a cause that explains why something happened. When something happens, we rush to file it away in one of those boxes. This caused that and that caused this, and so forth.

Here was a man who was once blind. Now he can see, and nobody takes time to wonder, to give thanks, to celebrate with him. The whole thing is turned into an intellectual problem. Let's all get together and explain this in such a way that we reassure ourselves that nothing new, nothing that doesn't fit our reassuring modes of explanation has occurred here. Because if something truly new had happened, and if it had happened by the hand of Jesus, then we might have to go back to the drawing board and rethink of few of our cherished assumptions like “if you are sick, you must have sinned,” or “there is nothing new under the sun.”

The preacher and Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge tells of one time, early in her ministry, when she was visiting a woman in her church who was in a wheelchair for many years. Before Rev. Rutledge left, the woman asked that she be prayed for. Pastor Rutledge held the woman's hand, just as she did with anyone she was praying for or with. She prayed for healing and hope, just as she usually did. And all of a sudden there was this incredible warmth flooding through Rev. Rutledge's body, flowing through her hands into the hands of the church member sitting in the wheelchair. The woman gasped. They quit praying and the woman got up out of the wheelchair and walked.

Years later, when Rev. Rutledge told this story, she said that was the one and only time something like that ever happened in her long years of serving as a pastor. She was not in the habit of expecting such things before that and she had always kept quiet about it afterwards. It had never happened since, but she had no doubt that God had healed that woman. For whatever reason, God chose to work in that way at that time with that person. And Rev. Rutledge said that she has never gotten over it since.

Fleming Rutledge says that ever since that day, she always is aware that God is at work in ways beyond our understanding. Her job is to be on the lookout for God and God's work.

Now these last three weeks while we've been in John, we've been hearing variations of this same theme – God is at work in ways beyond our understanding. Nicodemus was challenged to be born anew; he was told that the Spirit of God blows wherever God wants it to blow. Then the Samaritan woman at the well couldn't conceive of Jesus, of God coming to her. Her categories of understanding were upended. And today this blind man receives sight from Jesus while the

religious authorities who think they see are really the ones who are blind to what God is doing.

I know you're hearing this. God works in ways beyond our understanding. And I know you hear me encouraging you to look for God in larger ways. Look for God at work outside of our boxes. Look for God in your neighbor. Don't become so impatient with the frustrations and despair of this world, that we don't have the eyes to see what God is doing.

But there's one more thing I want you to hear: it's not up to you to fix the world. It's not up to us to change our neighbors and it's not up to us to change the world. God is at work in ways we don't even notice or understand. Our job is to have the eyes to see what God is doing and then go participate in it.

Here and awhile back I was listening to a recording of a civil rights mass meeting held in a black church somewhere in the South during the early 60's. The church was full and celebrities had come down from the North to encourage the civil rights workers. One of the celebrities speaks in the microphone, "You people are doing a great thing here." A shout comes from the back, "We're not doing this! God is doing this!"

Remember the story from during the days of apartheid in Cape Town, South Africa, when Archbishop Desmond Tutu was preaching to a large gathering in his cathedral. The place was surrounded by soldiers and police who outnumbered the worshipers three to one. They came into the sanctuary and stood all along the walls with tape recorders and pads, writing down what he was saying. They had already put him in jail. They were saying to him in effect, "Go ahead, be bold, be prophetic, and we'll put you right back in jail." He looked at them and pointed his

finger and said, “You are very powerful, but you are not gods. And I serve a God who cannot be mocked. You have already lost, so I invite you today to come and join the winning side!”

And the place erupted. People were on their feet dancing. The police didn’t know what to do with dancing worshipers. Music started, people were singing, and they danced out into the streets. It was chaos. It was unbelievable. It was beyond anything anyone had ever seen before.

It was the work of God.

Amen and amen!