

## THE RIGHT TIME...THE RIGHT PLACE

Fourth in series: "People Can Change!"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
April 1, 1984

John 9:1-41

We are talking about change this Lent, change in the context of our theme, "Dying to Live," change in the belief that people can change. Evidently, there is considerable interest in this topic. We have had to increase the number of printed sermons each week. Last fall we printed 40 sermons per Sunday; this week we printed 120 copies. My thesis is that many people today want to change. They are dissatisfied with their lives, and frustrated with the multitude of self-help books, for real change requires more than self-help.

We have looked at change in the context of sin. What's the matter with people is that we are living in a distorted relationship with our Creator, called sin, or self-centeredness as the story of Adam and Eve illustrates. Change, then, to be profound, to turn us around from a worship of self to a worship of God, is an act of God. When God acts in a life, the change is so profound it is as if one is born all over again. Last week, the woman at the Samaritan well was changed because Jesus first reached out to her; she responded according to her limited understanding; and Jesus laid out her life for her and God to see. Repentance, the act of looking honestly at your life, is a step in the process of change.

Today, our passage addresses the question of "when?" When does God act? When does God change you? We looked last week at how the process of change works; today we look at when does the process occur.

Jesus and his disciples, in the ninth chapter of John, were passing by and noticed a man who had been born blind. The disciples asked a question that has mystified mankind from the beginning of time, a question that still occupies our attention. They essentially asked, "Why is he blind? What happened that caused his blindness?" We all would like to know why some people have considerable trouble. We all wonder why we are the way we are, why we aren't like that, or why we are like this? The disciples assumed the common understanding of their day towards illness, an understanding that is still popular today. They said, "For whose sin is he suffering?" They assumed that blindness was a result, a judgment, a punishment for sin. They asked, "For whose sin is he being punished? His parents' or his own sin?" As he was born blind, they seem to be assuming that the man in a previous life had acted in such a manner that he was born blind in this life as a judgment.

But, Jesus refused to participate in such speculation. Some blame sin. Some blame society for their troubles. Some blame poor mother. But Jesus was more concerned about changing the man than speculating about why he was blind. Our society is great on diagnosing problems, mental illness, troubles, but weak on changing, or healing. What is important is not so much why you are the person you are, but what are you going to do about it. That is the prior question.

So Jesus spat on the ground, made some mud out of the spit, put it on the man's eyes, and told him to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash his eyes. The man obeyed, went to the pool, washed his eyes, and came back seeing. He received his eyesight. The blind man was in the right place at the right time.

Notice, faith is not mentioned. The man did not have faith in Jesus; he probably did not even know who Jesus was, as his response later indicates. But, he did obey, which is a form of faith, but his faith followed the act of Jesus. Jesus impressed him with his personality, anointed his eyes, told him to wash. Then, the man had faith to obey. He didn't interrogate: "What denomination are you? Are you ordained? What does the medical profession think of you?" He simply obeyed. I wonder what he felt as he walked to the pool with spit mud on his eyes. What would you have felt?

Did he feel skeptical? Expectant? Or just concerned about getting the mud out of his eyes?

The point is this: faith also is a gift of God. Don't feel guilty when your prayers are not immediately answered. Don't feel guilty when you are not changed or not healed as you would like. Don't then add more weight upon your shoulders by lamenting, "Oh, evidently my faith is too weak." A nurse happened upon a hospital room in which a minister and two lay people were berating the patient and his mother, saying, "If you had more faith, if you really believed in Jesus, if you were really born again, you would be healed." The nurse quickly called for help and got them out of there. As if God couldn't heal because your faith is not strong! Ridiculous! God heals, God acts, God changes you in His time, in His place. The blind man was healed, not because of his faith, but because he was at the right time in the right place.

The critical issue in this story is the attitude toward Jesus. Whenever a person or a group is confronted by Jesus, the issue is decision. Are you for or against Jesus? The healed man was interrogated severely by the Pharisees because, not only was he healed by this upstart Jesus, he was healed on the Sabbath, and certainly a man of God would not break the Sabbath law. As the man was interrogated, we see a progression in his attitude towards Jesus. First, he said, "The man called Jesus healed me." Then, as he was pushed further, he said, "Certainly, Jesus is a prophet." After he was excommunicated by the Pharisees, Jesus sought him out, talked to him further, and the healed man exclaimed, "Lord, I believe you are the Son of Man." He was led to faith and commitment, both of which followed, not preceded, God's act. He was changed; then he believed.

Now the Pharisees could not accept Jesus, nor decide for him. They would not believe the evidence of the healing. Jesus called them the "real blind ones." Here is the pity of the human situation. Many cannot change, cannot relate to God on His terms because they are blind, oblivious to their real situation. Alan Richardson wrote about this incident, "The real atheists are not those troubled by honest doubt, but those who trust in their own righteousness." The critical issue is this: Decide for or against Jesus. Do you live your life by yourself, for yourself, trusting in your own goodness, your own abilities, your own righteousness, which essentially is what the Bible calls "sin;" or do you live your life by trusting in God's grace, in the power of Christ to change you, in the certainty of God's love for you? That is the issue.

The stance then for those who trust in Jesus is to wait, wait for the right time, the right place, wait for God's grace, wait for God to change you. "Wait" is one of the most often used words in the Bible. "Wait on the Lord." Waiting is not too popular. We are activists. We want immediate gratification, immediate change. How long had the blind man sat there begging, waiting, until healing took place?

I see waiting taking two directions: First, be expectant. Live expectantly. How exciting it is to awaken every day with the expectation, "Is today the right time and right place? What will happen today? How will God use me today?" It is exciting to wait expectantly. Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy wrote in the 1800's, "For each age is a dream that is dying, Or one that is coming to birth." The dream is dying, or the dream is coming to birth. Each age, each person, each church, our nation, is either facing backward, lamenting over the dream that is dying, or facing the future with the expectation, the excitement of a dream coming to birth. Which way are you faced? To trust in Jesus with your life is to face forward, expecting great things, working for great things, as God acts.

Secondly, to wait for the right time and the place means to relax in Jesus. Put your life in God's care. Live in God's will, God's time. Be open to the Holy Spirit. Be ready. It is not a matter of your faith, your acts, your doing. Trust in Christ's salvation, not in your own planning, or scheming, or time-line, or pretense, struggle,

or endeavor. After his presidency, Harry Truman enjoyed speaking to groups of children. On one occasion, an anxious small boy with red hair, whose ears had grown up but not his face (as described by Merle Miller in Plainly Speaking), asked, "Mr. President, was you popular when you was a boy?" Can't you hear what the boy was asking? He was probably teased because of his ears. He probably was never at the center, always on the side, a misfit. The future of the world for him hung on Mr. Truman's reply. The President looked at the boy over the glasses that always made him look like an irritated owl, and said, "Why, no. I was never popular. The popular boys were the ones who were good at sports and had big, tight fists. I was never like that. Without my glasses, I was blind as a bat, and to tell the truth, I was kind of a sissy. If there was any danger of getting into a fight, I always ran!" Then, the little boy with the big ears began to applaud as the others joined in.

Relax! It's okay to be a sissy. Be who you are! Not everyone is popular. Your future does not lie in your ability to pretend to be someone else. Don't imitate success. Don't fake being "macho." Don't struggle, strive, push. Relax and put your salvation in Jesus' hands. Trust in God's care. Believe in God's love for you.

The blind man was healed, was changed profoundly, by Jesus, who led him then into faith. Change, the future, your salvation, is in Christ's hands. Trust, relax, wait expectantly for the right time and the right place.

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