

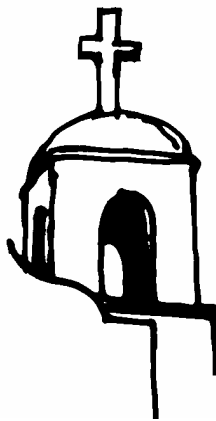
**Ordinary Items,  
Extraordinary Savior**  
**Part 7: *A Leap in the Mud***

Sermon by

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**July 6, 2008**



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*First United Methodist Church of Winter Park*

*On the move to make a difference through Jesus Christ.*

**Ordinary Items, Extraordinary Savior, Part 1: *A Leap in the Mud***  
**John 9:1-12**

Try to imagine that today is the Sabbath in the first century, a day to worship and rest, but to do little else. In fact, in the first century the Sabbath was a holy day where no work was done from sun up until the sun went down, even including anything involved with healing. If you had injured, say, your thigh, and there was ointment that brought you relief, you could not use it on the Sabbath, that is if you were interested in being obedient to God. And just in case you were a free spirit who did not worry too much about keeping the Law, there were Sabbath enforcers, called Pharisees, that could make your life miserable. When I was a kid we didn't eat out or shop on our Sabbath, which was Sunday. I knew of kids whose parents wouldn't let them play football or even wrestle with their siblings on Sunday. By the time I was a teenager we ate out, but if I did convince my mom to take us to the mall to shop, she did it with much guilt. Today, our Sabbath looks no different than any other day of the week. That one day when we were all supposed to slow down and remember that we are the people of God, is gone. But in the first century, there were no exceptions to the rules of the Sabbath.

It is in this context that our story begins, with Jesus healing a blind man. Did you know that of all the miracles of Jesus, bringing sight to people that were blind was the most prominent? None of his followers were attributed with restoring sight. In fact, curing the blind was considered specifically messianic activity. Back in the first century, many of the Jews were waiting for God to send a messiah, one who would free them from those who oppressed them – the oppressor in that day being the Roman government. Bringing sight to the blind would be a function and a sign of God's own Messiah, and Jesus fulfills this. This was also really irritating the religious leaders of that day. In fact Jesus had been irritating them for a while. By the time

Jesus restores this young man's sight, anyone considered a follower of Jesus was kicked out of their synagogue. And in this story, not only is Jesus restoring sight, he is doing it on the Sabbath. This really has ticked them off.

For the next four weeks, we will be preaching on object lessons that Jesus used to teach about the reign of God. Remember, when Jesus began his ministry he announced that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. That meant that the reign of God was both here and it was coming. The miracles that Jesus did were in fact ushering in a period, one that we are still in today as we await the return of the Christ. In this period of waiting we will see glimpses of God's reign as we live out the life of the gospel. This moment of healing was such a glimpse, but the religious leaders of that day did not recognize it for what it was. Instead, they missed the entire beauty of the miracle and only focused on the breaking of the Sabbath.

Our object lesson today is mud, a common element to all people that comes from mixing dirt and liquid, and in this story the liquid is spit. What an odd thing to teach with, but you'll see that Jesus always uses what was common and recognizable in our world to teach us about him. Next week we will talk about seeds, then coins, and eventually fish. Later today we will all take communion together and we will use bread and juice, again common elements to celebrate God's restoration in our lives. But right now let's talk about mud.

From the Scripture we read we learn that Jesus and his disciples came upon a man who was blind from birth and he spit on the ground, created some mud and put it on the man's eyes instructing him to go wash them in the Pool of Siloam. Now if you are sitting thinking, how rude, you are probably not alone. We know that Jesus had the power to simply say, "you are healed," and he did at times, and the man would have been healed. But this time Jesus required something of the man.

This past week I talked with a member of our congregation who is legally blind. Virginia Allen lives over at Winter Park Towers and worships with us on Sundays at the traditional service at 11:00 a.m. Virginia lost her sight twenty-five years ago. It was degenerative disease that began gradually at first. It took some time to convince her doctor that something was wrong with her sight. But in one appointment she drove herself over and was declared legally blind by the time she left. The loss of mobility has been her greatest challenge. She admitted that early on she struggled with a lot of anger and frustration at her situation. Today, she has peripheral vision of the size of a dime. It is like tunnel vision. She can actually see me preaching today, but when she comes up for communion, one of her friends, usually Frank Stanley, will have to walk her up and move her hand toward the bread and the cup.

I thought of this as I considered why Jesus put mud in the man's eyes. We don't know the answer. Scripture doesn't tell us. During that period of time, spit was considered to have some healing elements to it. But still that doesn't really answer the question. I wondered if maybe the man had some partial sight, like Virginia. Maybe he could see some light or even shapes, but once Jesus put mud in his eyes he would have lost any vision that was there. We don't even know how he got to the Pool of Siloam, if someone took him there or he simply struggled along. We only know that he got there and washed his eyes out and he could see.

I think another question that occurs to me is why did this man believe Jesus in the first place? Reading this text through the end of the chapter it is very clear that the man did not know much about who Jesus was. His parents are later questioned to identify him as their son who was born blind. You see, some people were denying the miracle of Jesus by saying it wasn't even him, that this man claiming restored sight only looked like the blind man. His parents did acknowledge his identity, but also distanced themselves from him by saying, "Ask him

yourselves, he is of age.” Remember, we said that being a follower of Jesus often meant being kicked out of your synagogue, the place of learning and worship, as well as where you met socially, talked politics, and attended funerals. It was the center of your life and you did not want to lose access to it. So this man probably knew Jesus as a teacher, but he also knew him as a troublemaker that could mess up your social structure.

That leads us to another issue that is addressed in this story. This man was blind and in the first century it was believed that blindness came as a result of sin in your life. So basically, if you are born blind, not only do you struggle to live and care for yourself, you’re also blamed for your handicap. People felt like you got what you deserved. I don’t think people were just naturally meaner back in the first century, they just didn’t like the idea that random hardship or tragedy could happen to anyone. That was scary. It was easier to blame the victim and tell yourself it could never happen to you. So sin was the theory that accounted for his blindness. The problem with that theory was how did you account for people being born blind? Could you sin in your mother’s womb? That was a controversy during the first century and it is the disciple’s question to Jesus that draws us into this story. Let me reread the first two verses of John 9:

*As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”*

It was not their compassion that drew their attention to this man, but rather their curiosity about Jesus’ opinion concerning a controversial subject. But thankfully, Jesus first saw a man that suffered and he spit in the mud and changed his life for ever.

The book of John uses light and darkness to describe the state of the world that Jesus enters. Jesus is the light that can bring sight to a world of people that live in spiritual darkness. But even if you know Jesus and are a follower of him, you will struggle with some level of

darkness or blindness. Maybe not complete darkness, but if you only have, say tunnel vision, your mobility is very limited. It was very humbling to ask Virginia about her struggle with blindness. I felt intrusive in asking her what it was like. She talked about dropping items and having to get on her knees and feel all over the ground just to find them. Now, by the grace of God, she says when she drops something, she can move right to it to pick it up. Virginia has a good friend that also lives at the Towers and is also blind. She said that when they walk around the community there at the Towers to attend a function or eat a meal, everyone is very helpful and accommodating. Unfortunately, everyone is saying go right or go left attempting to make their lives easier when in fact it is their left not Virginia's, and she goes bumping into things based on their incorrect perceptions.

Spiritually, I think we are all like Virginia. We have a level of sight, but generally, in this walk of faith our mobility is greatly challenged. Like that blind man with mud in his eyes, we stumble, we fall, people try to help us, but it is not easy. I considered asking you all to try a little mud in your eyes but I knew that was a bit messy. For the kids we got you a sleep mask. If you have a mask, go ahead and put it on. I will put on one myself so you won't feel like I am looking at you specially. If you don't have a mask, just close your eyes and put yourself in darkness. For some of you taking off your glasses will accomplish the same thing. Imagine you have mud in your eyes and the only way you are going to see some light is by going to the Pool of Siloam. If that does not challenge you, think about something that is hard, unfair or even tragic in your life that you must deal with. Like the man born blind we all have troubles at some point in our lives. Think on those right now. Keep your eyes closed and think about what it feels like to be blind or deal with your struggles.

I think it might feel lonely, like no one really understands your world. It feels unfair, you didn't do anything that caused it, or at least that was never your intention. We never mean to hurt others and we never seek out trouble, it comes with living in a dark world. Maybe you feel like there is no hope. How could you possibly make it to the Pool of Siloam? Why does everything have to be so hard? Why can't anything good be easy? Will my trouble ever go away?

You can open your eyes now or take off your masks. For most of us, our sight has now been restored, but here is a spiritual truth: for all of us, we still struggle with spiritual blindness. We don't see fully all that God has for us. We all deal with struggles or trouble. We still think we know what is best and we don't rely on him like we could. Our relationship with God is limited to our limited view of him. We are not convinced he loves us enough or has our best intentions in mind. We still rely on our own reasoning power and forget to ask God for his direction for our lives. We only cry out to him as a last resort when he has been waiting to comfort us all along.

Virginia told me about her journey to finding peace and joy again in her life. While she has been a believer her whole life, blindness has not been the only tragedy she dealt with. She lost her only son when he was a teenager and her husband of 53 years died just eight years ago. Yet still she says life is good and she is happy. How can that be? She has learned to turn all of her cares over to God. She relies on him for everything. When she talked about learning to find the things she dropped more quickly, she did not explain it as an increase in her senses, rather it was by God's grace. She is grateful. She is also wise. She told me she felt that something was missing in her life and so she did something rather surprising. She took a leap of faith. She created a ministry. She intentionally moved outside of her world, her blindness, and reached out

to others in Christian ministry. She became the hands, feet and even the eyes of God. One of her friends takes her over to some of the residents at the Towers that are very elderly and not able to move around. Virginia, who is blind, goes to them and visits and loves on people who have less mobility than her. She says that visiting them fill her with joy.

Should our blindness or the mud in our eyes stop us from being obedient to Jesus? Does taking a leap of faith feel impossible? The blind man did not let lack of sight, mud in his eyes, the distance he had to travel to the Pool of Siloam, the ridicule of the religious leaders, being blamed for his own blindness, or even the possibility of breaking the Sabbath stop him from trusting the words of this man named Jesus. What is stopping us? I want to be like Virginia, though physically blinded by disease, spiritually, Virginia can see.