

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: A WORD TO THE CONFIRMANDS; JOHN 9: 24-38a; 3-26-17; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC

Let me say a word about today. You confirmands passed with flying colors through rigorous instruction from Debbie and Mark, one on one reflection and sharing with your mentors, and just this morning you successfully completed what the *Book of Order* calls 'an examination' with the elders of the church.

You have written individual statements of faith, made stoles your mentors draped over your shoulders and you are wearing crosses that your Westminster family has given to you and your parents have placed around you.

You kneeled on these steps where generations of elders, deacons and confirmands before you have kneeled to receive the laying on of hands, the Prayer of Confirmation, and to have the Holy Spirit of God descend into your hearts as she did when you were baptized.

It's a day rich in symbolism and deep in meaning for your parents and for all of us – your church family – who have fulfilled our baptismal promise to see each of you to this moment.

Your parents are remarkable. Seeing a teenager through a year of religious instruction, leading to the tender moment at which parents, for their part, are required to let go and trust, to let *you* test your heart and wings, is one of the miracles of nature without which our species, or any species, would cease to exist. The business of letting go started when you moved from a crib to a bed, when you learned how to ride a bike, when you got on the school bus the first day, and when you went away to summer camp or on an over night field trip.

Nor does it stop or get any easier – your parents will be letting go of you for the rest of their lives – college, marriage, raising your own children. Sometimes you want them to let go sometimes you don't. But we know this: you wouldn't get very far in life if your parents didn't give you a nudge out of the nest. Give your parents a big hug today!

The spiritual journey you/we/all of us here today are on is unique in this sense: just as a surfer can't control the wave or a sailor the wind, you can't control when and where the power and presence of God will show up in your life.

But, like a surfer or sailor *you can learn to read the wind* of God's Spirit *and the power* of God's grace to guide your life. To do this, you will have to let go of yourself, or that part of you that wants control your life to avoid risk or conflict or some other version of getting out of your comfort zone.

Once you open yourself to the power of God and presence of Jesus it will demand your best, hold you accountable to yourself, cause you to grow in places you did not think you could or want to grow, and it will shape you into a person who is better than yourself. And though you are each excellent students – do not expect to get straight As in spirituality; there's no such thing as perfection here; but think of yourselves as beautiful works in progress. And think of us that way too, because all of us are still making mistakes, still learning, growing.

Let me say a word about the story of the blind man – it is, hands down, a literary and spiritual jewel – with the clarity and richness of a painting by a Dutch master and the complexity and genius of a Russian novel. The writer of the Gospel of John is as brilliant as Shakespeare and wise as Solomon. I urge you to find a quiet place and read this little novella of 7 scenes and 41 verses in its entirety this afternoon.

A man is born blind; the disciples ask Jesus, ‘is he or are his parents sinners?’ In ancient days it was thought that when someone suffered from blindness or disease God was punishing them for some sin they committed.

As I said, we all make mistakes, sometimes big mistakes. Jesus says the man is not blind because he or his parents are sinful; but his blindness will reveal the grace of God. Jesus applies mud to the man’s eyes, tells him to wash, and when he does the man can see for the first time.

Confusion descends on the little village where the man lives. *Just imagine* – people who have known him all his life are not sure he is the man who was blind! The local minister and church leaders get into the act; because his healing was on a Sunday and neither the man nor the alleged healer were in church, the leaders conclude that whoever thinks they healed this man (if, in fact he is the man born blind) whoever the healer thinks he is, he is not worthy of praise but a sinner because he should have known that no one is to perform work on the Sabbath, including healing!

By now things are spiraling out of control. The minister and spiritual v.i.p.s start interrogating the man relentlessly; until the blind man suggests that perhaps what they really want to know is how to become followers of the man who healed him; the man born blind continues, ‘for your information, as if I should have to remind you, the leaders of the church – were the man who healed me not from God he could do nothing.’

This is the acolyte instructing the bishop. Stricken with rage, the religious leaders brand the man born blind a horrible sinner and “drive” away. The man is alone, Jesus reappears, informs him that indeed he is from God, and the man says, “Lord, I believe.” And worships him.

Let me say a word about personal experience. The story of the blind man, in fact, the story of the Bible is built *on the personal experience of people who encounter God* – in a flood, a burning bush, a divided sea, in the miraculous escape from an oppressor; and later in the man Jesus – when he spoke, when he healed, and when he was raised from a tomb.

The entire biblical account is based on the personal testimony of everyday folks who experience the presence of God in their lives. The army of Pharaoh is in hot pursuit of God’s people and somehow they get through the Dead Sea and give God credit for opening the water. John’s Gospel is a treasure trove of these events: water turned to wine, a lame man walks, a leper is healed, a dead man raised to life – in every instance the people say it was God.

Over and against this we have, since the advent of the scientific method, a way of validating phenomena based on physical measurement that produces what we call ‘metrics’ that conform to what we’ve discovered are laws of nature; that give us what we call ‘facts.’

There is much to be praised about the scientific method. Indeed, if our leaders in Washington knew better they would not cut funding to scientific research but increase funding to find more cures for disease, more ways to limit climate change, and a host of other discoveries that would ensure the health and well-being of people and the planet.

Yet, faith in God, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit is another matter altogether; it does not depend or rely upon facts; faith reduced to facts does not validate what we believe but reveals how little we actually know about the historical Jesus or God's people – Israel.

If we say facts are the measure of faith and not experience or belief based on experience, we disconnect ourselves from the power of life. Faith that depends upon facts heads into the dead end of trying to confine God to a method of proof and turns to stone.

Did you notice in the story that the blind man affirms and clings to his story even though others try to discount it and even though he can't explain himself how or why it happened; he doesn't know who Jesus is; all he knows is that he was blind but now he sees.

It is a rich irony, and true to life, that the man born blind is the only one who sees while all the others are blind. The disciples wonder if the man or his parents are sinners; the neighbors aren't sure if he really is the man born blind; the religious leaders are convinced Jesus is a sinner. Even his own parents seem unsure of their son's story and say, "ask him, he is of age."

Finally, the man born blind, realizing the people can't see him for who he is or accept his testimony shouts, "I am the man!" And here's another irony – those who know him best – his neighbors, his minister, his own family – do not accept him or his story.

Lastly, let me say a word about how this story applies to us. The experience of Jesus spreading mud on his eyes, washing in the pool, then receiving his sight *is the blind man's connection* to the living presence of God in his life; but he doesn't know yet that it was God who opened his eyes, but that he can see is undeniable.

A great theologian once said, "we live our faith forward and understand it backward." It is more important to live our faith than to understand it. The blind man doesn't understand what has happened to him until he talks with Jesus. All he knows is that he was blind and now he sees. But that is the foundation for what becomes his faith.

You might say that all of us are blind like the people in the story. We wake up every day and go about the routine of school, work, play – not thinking of Jesus or God or anything other than getting through the next exam or business project or sports competition. Then something happens, some old obstacle is removed, some wound suddenly healed, some paralyzing fear taken away. And we realize we've been given a great gift. We live in a society that will insist on all kinds of rational explanations for the miracles that occur in our lives and reject any explanations having to do with faith or God.

I say that this journey of faith is like a surfer catching a wave or a sailor catching the wind to propel the boat. We don't control the wind or the wave, the power that gives us life, that heals us, that performs miracles.

What we can do is learn to read the water and when a wave appears paddle our boards into its crest and let it take us further than we ever imagined it possible to go.

We can learn to watch the weather, the clouds, the ripples on the surface of the lake, the condition of the sails and when a gust descends and let its invisible power propel us to our greatest dreams and fulfillment.

You each had to reach into some personal experience of God to write your personal statements of faith; some voice, some memory caused you to choose the words and write those wonderful statements about God.

That's the first step – to listen to your life; to be still and let the voice of God speak through the news of the day, through a friend, or a cry for help, or call for justice. Then pray and pray some more; talk with your mentors, talk with your family; and what will happen is Jesus will appear in those cries or calls or conversations.

Some people say faith is caught not taught. If faith was merely about facts it would be easy to teach. But it's not; faith is about being let go and learning to use your own wings, it's about letting yourself go and getting out of your comfort zone, it's about keeping watch for God every day for that big roller on the horizon then getting you and your board ready to ride for the thrill of your life. There's no way to avoid the risk, the chance that you'll fall off; just trust.

I'm not talking about standing on a long board in the tunnel of a 30 foot Laguna Beach roller, I'm talking about something better than that; about using your gifts to make the world – your school, your neighborhood, your college someday – more just, more kind, more open than when you found it.

There are all kinds of metaphors for the abundant life you embraced today when you reconfirmed your baptismal vows – riding a big wave, having a sea part to let you pass when you thought you were trapped, having your eyes opened to a new world, being raised from the depths of despair, from death itself.

Use your wings, be a brave work in progress, don't be afraid of making mistakes, Jesus will give you your life back again and again. Amen.