

"Make Mud So the Sun Shines"
A Fourth Sunday in Lent;
John 9:1-41; March 26, 2017
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. THE NAMES WE CALL AND ARE CALLED

"The man born blind"

"The man blind from birth"

The visually-challenged one. The one with limitations. Not quite "normal." Not wholly whole. The sinner or son of sinners—obviously! For why would someone be born different from the rest of us unless.....someone had done something wrong?! There's a reason for these things, right? God must have wanted to teach him something, right? A lesson to be learned. A blessing in disguise.

Why is this man only identified in this way? He has no name in this story. Just a bunch of descriptors. Yet, the Pool gets a name! The pool where he washed. "Siloam"—which means "sent."

Como se llama? What's your name? More literally, what are you called? What do you call yourself?

In our life and times—our society, we are probably more about labels than we care to admit. And it makes good sense, because labels help us "orient" each other. Figure out where they come from in all aspects of life and history. We want to be able to "put a handle" on folks. But, it also follows that our very human tendency is to then put them in a box, a category. And suddenly, we've created limitation and lines around that box. And I dare say we do this to ourselves far more than to or with others.

"Who ARE you?" If someone asked you that, what would be the first thing out of your mouth?

Who are you, Ron?

Who are you, Helen?
Who are you, Shawna?
Who are you, Steve?

Would we most likely start with a gender distinction.
"Well....uh....I am a woman."

Or a vocation? "I am a pastor." "I am a teacher."

"I am RETIRED!" would likely come out with joy from many of you.

What then? After gender, job?

Family role? "I am a mother of 4!"

"I am a Pet Mother of 8!"

II. IDENTITY, LABELS AND NAMES, OH MY!

Margaret Wheatley, in her provocative book, "Far From Home," points out that "**identity**" is the "organizing dynamic" of our culture. Cultural identity, as well as the way we identify ourselves as individuals, is the social thread that binds us together and affects how we view the world, each other, and ourselves. Our key lens on life.

Marketing has had a huge influence in recent years on how we "self-identify", as we are bombarded with countless choices every day of which products we will buy, which will make us look like this or live in that lifestyle, or be seen as such and such.

Wheatley says: "Everything is a choice and what we choose tells people who we are. It's common now to describe yourself in terms of what *kind* of person you are, either a this or a that: "I'm a dog person, not a cat person.

"In an airport," she muses, "I overheard a seven-year-old girl ask her nine-year-sister," 'Am I a *clothes* person or an *accessory* person?' Without hesitating, her sister instantly replied, 'Oh, you're definitely an accessory person."

III. DESCRIPTORS IN THE DETAILS

Hear a part of this bible story again, and listen for the descriptors; how each character is talked about or portrayed.

1-2 Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?"

3-5 Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do.

6-7 Then Jesus spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man's eyes, and said, "Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "Sent"). The man went and washed—and saw.

8 Soon the town was buzzing. His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were saying, "Why, isn't this the man we knew; the one who sat here and begged?"

9 Others said, "It's him all right!" But others objected, "It's not the same man at all. It just *looks* like him." He said, "It's me, the very one."

10 They said, "How did your eyes get opened?"

11 "A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' I did what he

said. When I washed, I saw."

12 "So where is he?" "I don't know."

13-15 They marched the man to the Pharisees. This day when Jesus healed his blindness was the **Sabbath**. The Pharisees grilled him again on how he had come to see. He said, "He put a clay paste on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see."

16 Some of the Pharisees said, "Obviously, this man can't be from God. He doesn't keep the Sabbath."

Others countered, "How can a bad man do miraculous, God-revealing things like this?" There was a split in their ranks.

17 They came back at the blind man, "You're the expert. He opened *your* eyes. What do you say about him?" He said, "He is a prophet."

18-19 The Jews didn't believe it, didn't believe the man was blind to begin with. So they called the parents of the man now bright-eyed with sight. They asked them, "Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? So how is it that he now sees?"

20-23 His parents said, "We know he is our son, and we know he was born blind. But we don't know how he came to see—haven't a clue about who opened his eyes. Why don't you ask him? He's a grown man and can speak for

himself.”

IV. WHY DEFINED IN THE PAST?

Theologian David Lose brings an interesting twist to the way we look at this story—one we’ve probably read and heard preached on more times than we can count!

Lose suggests we ask the question: *Why* is this man *described* in these ways, as if his **past** *defines* him and he and the friends both, can’t focus on the transformation that has occurred to him? They’re all “stuck” in the past definitions. Even going forward: “The man who *used* to beg.” “The man who “formerly had been blind.”

And then, to turn and look at *ourselves* in the same light:

“I wonder how often we do that in our lives as well – *define* ourselves in terms of limiting factors or difficult things we’ve experienced. Even if we’ve overcome them, and take a measure of pride in that, I still wonder if it does justice to our current reality or links us too strongly to the past.”

“When we refer to some as “divorced” or “widowed,” for instance, are we honoring a significant relationship that has ended or defining someone in terms of what they once were? Even a term like “cancer-survivor” – which I know has many positive associations for those who have endured diagnosis and treatment and come out on the other side grateful for their recovery – can, I imagine, risk defining a person in terms of what they have overcome and reducing who they are to a single dimension.”

“This is not at all to deny the importance of the past or some of the scars (or for that matter triumphs) we carry forward. But, perhaps, to remind us that the way forward is in the future. That there’s a good reason that the windshield of a car is so big and the rearview mirror relatively small: because while it’s good to be able to glance back once in a while, the key to getting where you need to go is looking forward.”

And forward is the direction Jesus is calling *us*, as well as the man “who *used to be blind*.” We don’t deny the past—with all its hurts, sorrows, mistakes and regrets, but they do not define us because we are –most of all; first and foremost—God’s beloved children.

V. THE STORY I’M LETTING GO OF

As we reflect on this story, we see glimpses of our own journeys; of places where we knew only blindness in the past, but with God’s help discover and sight in the present and future.

You were given a slip of paper today. Take it out now and spend a couple moments in silence. On that paper, name something of the past that you want to overcome or leave behind. An identity, perhaps, that has described you in the past, but you no longer need to define you. It’s not serving a life-giving purpose, or it’s limiting you too much in the here and now. What past descriptor or label or issue is holding you back ; keeping you from being all who God calls you to be?

No one will see these papers except you and God.

(Few moments of silence)

God comes to each of us—in the naming water of the baptismal font, when we put that water cross on our foreheads. In the ashes on those same foreheads on Ash Wednesday that reminded us that we are dust and to dust we return.

In the Living Water from the Well (capital W) that nourishes our souls. In the mud of life—mixed with spit and vinegar—and wipes the old identity away. Names and claims us with a new moniker. Where once you were _____, now you are _____. Where once you were blind; now you see!

Where once you were limited by the name you called yourself; by the box you put yourself in; by the limitations you argued for, now you are set free. Set on a new path with a new identity.

Go and wash yourself in the Pool.
For you are identified as God's child wholly and completely and the future is open.

VI. ADJUST TO THE NEW REALITY

Take that paper home and check it once in awhile.
Remind yourself, if you have slipped back into defining yourself by that label from the past, that you are no longer there. Jesus has set us free to see!

It might take a few tries, as it did for the man who used to be blind and his friends, who used to know him as the one who begged—to adjust to the new reality.

And then, commit to being one of those friends who helps make mud so the sun shines for others. Commit to staying away from “branding” each other; describing with unhelpful labels from the past—as if *that* were our comrades' true and full identity.

“Make Mud So the Sun Shines”
For others. For yourself. Spit in the soil, get down in the dirt of life, of creation, of the elements we have right at our feet, and dig in. Use the stuff of life to bring healing, insight, and transformation to others.

Jesus said: As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me; night is coming when no one can work. **5** While I am in the world, I am the light for the world.”

When we help each other—by getting down in the mud of life with each other and seeing the truth of who we have thought ourselves and others to be, and then see the change—when we

embrace the transformation in each other—we bring the Light into the world. We help others to open their own eyes. To see where they, and we, had been blind before.

“Hey you! Aren't you the one who used to sit here, begging, and blind to what truly mattered in life? What *happened* to you?!”

“The man called Jesus made some mud, rubbed it on my eyes, and told me to go to Siloam and wash my face. So I went, and as soon as I washed, I could see.”

I once lost but now I'm found
Was blind, but now I see. Amen.