



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - February 5, 2017 Sermon

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## Seeing - And Not Seeing - The Light of the World

John 9:1-41

My daughter used to call it the Dun-Dun show. This was way back in the 1990's, and the show of course was *Law and Order*. Just in case you haven't turned on a television in the past 27 years: Every episode of *Law and Order*—and all of its many, many spinoffs—has the same formula: opening at the scene of the crime (usually some innocent passerby having discovered a dead body), and then that distinctive, by now iconic, DUN DUN. Every scene after that, the cops or district attorneys interrogating witnesses, family members, suspects—sometimes at the scene of the crime, sometimes at the family's home, sometimes back at the precinct, sometimes in court—each scene introduced by a black screen with the location of the interrogation in stark white type: Interrogation Room #2, 12th Precinct DUN-DUN

And every scene shot in that jittery, camera-angles-mostly-from-below, cinema-verite-via-MTV, quick-cut, meant-to-keep-you-watching-through-the-commercials style and then: DUN-DUN: black screen white type: another scene and then another and still another: until interview by interview, interrogation by interrogation, the suspense building with lots of twists and turns, the truth is finally revealed. DUN DUN (Warning: I'm going to do that a few more times.)

Why am I talking about *Law and Order*, you ask? Well, our Scripture reading today, Chapter 9 of John's Gospel is just like an episode of *Law and Order*! (no, really). It opens with the scene Nancy just read: Jesus healing the man born blind: that's the crime—the alleged crime—that will be under investigation, since Jesus did it on the Sabbath. But really that's just the occasion, you might even say the pretext, for the investigation. What's really under investigation is Jesus. And what's really at issue is sin and blindness—who's a sinner and who's really blind.

But here's the shocking reversal: in John 9, it's the investigators themselves, and not the two persons under investigation, who turn out to be the guilty ones. But it takes no less than eight scenes, interview by interview, interrogation by interrogation, the suspense building with lots of twists and turns—for that truth finally to be revealed.

The second scene occurs after the man returns from washing in the pool at Siloam.

### **The man's neighborhood, somewhere in Jerusalem. DUN DUN.**

"Could this be him?" they ask. Some say yes; others, no. And as they bicker, the man stands there among them (it's kind of funny): "It's me; it's me; I swear to you, it's me." And so they interrogate him: "How did this happen?" And the man gives an honest, straightforward, just-the-facts account of what happened: "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."

"Well where is Jesus now?"

"I don't know."

So they take him to the Pharisees—the religious leaders of the day.

### **Interrogation Room #1, Pharisee Headquarters, Jerusalem. DUN-DUN.**

"How could this Jesus do this? The Pharisees ask—they can't believe it either. And they're divided too. Some say: "He's a sinner—he did this on the Sabbath." Others say: "How could a sinner perform such a sign?" So they interrogate the man: What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." And the man answers: "He is a prophet."

Commercial: you caught that last turn didn't you? Now the question is no longer: "Did Jesus break the law?" It's become, "Is Jesus a sinner?" And the man has taken his first step towards faith in Jesus: He says Jesus is not a sinner but a prophet—someone sent from God who bears God's word and power. Back to John 9: So the Pharisees—frustrated now—call in the parents of the man.

### **Interrogation Room #2, Pharisee Headquarters, Jerusalem. DUN-DUN.**

"Is this your son?" The parents, like parents in almost every Law and Order episode, are wary, scared for themselves and their child, so they play it safe, offering as little information as possible: "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age." So the Pharisees go back to the man who was born blind.

### **Interrogation Room #1, Pharisee Headquarters, Jerusalem. DUN-DUN.**

"Give glory to God!" they shout at him. "We know that this man Jesus is a sinner." Which is one of those intimidation tactics that interrogators sometimes use. If the man continues to maintain that it was Jesus who healed him, then he will be committing blasphemy. Jesus is a sinner—or so the Pharisees say—and to give credit to a sinner and not to God is to deny God his due, which is blasphemy. The man, though, well, you gotta admire him, he's not going to fall into their trap. He parries: "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do now: I once was blind, but now I see."

OK, that's indisputable. But the Pharisees, trying to wear him down, want him to go over the same ground again: "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" But again the man proves more than their equal: "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

ZING! Now the Pharisees are hot: "You are his disciple, but we do not know where this Jesus comes from." If the Pharisees do not know where Jesus comes from, the man will tell them—for a second time. He says to them: "Here is an astonishing thing [sarcasm]! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes . . . If this man did not come from God, he could not have done that."

And now the Pharisees—and this is what people in power sometimes do when someone says something they don't like—they attack him. They don't dispute what he says; instead, they attack him: "You were born entirely in your sins, and yet you're trying to teach us?" And they drive him out. And so—next scene—Jesus seeks him out.

### **Somewhere outside of Jerusalem two days later. DUN-DUN.**

"Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus asks him.

"And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."

"You have seen him, and he is the one speaking with you."

And now the dramatic climax: "Lord, I believe." And the man worships Jesus.

Commercial: yes, the man received physical vision, but that was just the beginning of the story. John 9 is all about his gaining spiritual vision: When he washed at Siloam, he saw, for the first time in his life, the physical light of the world. But later, when he worships Jesus, he sees him as the true light of the world. The man believes: Yes, Jesus is a prophet but so much more than a prophet: he is the son of man, the Messiah. This is the man's spiritual vision. If the once-blind man was born entirely in his sins, he is no longer: he has been born again, born from above. This is what Jesus told the disciples to look for: God's work—God's glory—in the man. But as for the Pharisees . . .

### **Somewhere outside Jerusalem, later that same day. DUN DUN.**

"I came into this world so that those who do not see, may see," and when Jesus says this, he's talking about the man born blind and many like him who gain spiritual vision . . . "And I came into this world and so that those who do see, may become blind." And, of course, when Jesus says this, he's talking about . . .

Well, the Pharisees know that he's talking about them: "Surely we are not blind, are we?" they ask him. Jesus says to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." And so in eight scenes, interview by interview, interrogation by interrogation, the suspense building with lots of twists and turns—the truth is finally revealed: It's a shocking reversal: it's the Pharisees who are blind; it's the Pharisees who are the sinners.

*Teacher, who sinned? The Pharisees or their parents?* We're in danger of returning to the same question that the disciples asked Jesus at the beginning of the chapter only now to ask it about the Pharisees. But again it's the wrong question: Rather than trying to see who sinned, we should be looking for God at work in the world—looking for God's glory in the world.

And of course not being able to see God's glory in the world is the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees. And the reason that they can't see God's glory in the world is that they're too busy promoting their own. Oh, yes, yes, they say they're all about God's glory, but that's just a pretext—look at how they act: "God's glory" always, inevitably, turns out to be whatever protects and promotes their own preeminence and power. It's the essence of religious hypocrisy: using God and God-talk to advance one's own power and self-aggrandizement.

Of course, the hypocrites don't see themselves as hypocrites, as the disguised and self-deceived enemies of religion; no, they see themselves as God's champions. That's part—the worst part—of the blindness: the blindness to oneself and to the true nature of one's own actions. Sin darkens the mind, and in that darkness, we go right on sinning. The Pharisees are not immune to this either: soon enough some of their number will participate in crucifying the glory of God, all done of course for the glory of God.

And none of this is unique to the Pharisees: There is a little Pharisee in all of us: I know there is in me, more than a little perhaps. Nor is it unique to religion: people, especially leaders, can wrap themselves in the language of glory and greatness—of the college, the company, the community, the corporation, or even the country—when what they're really doing is trying to satiate their own insatiable need for power, recognition and glory. And they can do great, great damage in the process. But here I am: trying to see who's sinning, when I should be looking for God at work in the world—looking for God's glory in the world. So where can we see God at work—God's glory—in our world today? We don't have to look far.

Have any of you heard of Brad Smith? It's such an ordinary, run-of-the-mill name, I should probably tell you which "Brad Smith" I'm talking about. Back in 1990, on January 24, 1990, this Brad Smith was an ordinary, run-of-the-mill youth pastor in an ordinary, run-of-the-mill Presbyterian church in an ordinary, run-of-the-mill suburb of Columbia SC delivering an ordinary, run-of-the-mill pastoral prayer, when out of his mouth came these words: "Lord, even as we enjoy the Super Bowl football game, help us be mindful of those who are without a bowl of soup to eat."

And today, beginning from that one sentence and the work of Brad's youth group, today, 27 years later, with over \$122 million dollars in cash and food items having been raised, every penny of which has gone to feed the hungry, today with the Souper Bowl of Caring active in all 50 states and having been recognized and supported not just by NFL owners, but by former presidents and first ladies of the United States, today this day, February 5, 2017, the day of Super Bowl LI (that's 51 for those of you who forget your Roman numerals), today with over 72,000 people in the stands at NRG Stadium in Houston Texas, today with over 100 million people tuned in worldwide to watch the game, and even more to watch the commercials and the halftime show, today with Robert Kraft the owner of the New England Patriots sitting in his luxury box, today with Lady Gaga (whatever her hair color may be) performing at halftime, today Brad Smith . . . today Brad Smith is an ordinary, run-of-the-mill pastor in an ordinary, run-of-the-mill Presbyterian church in an ordinary, run-of-the-mill suburb of Columbia SC, delivering, as I speak, an ordinary, run-of-the-mill pastoral prayer.

I knew Brad from my days in South Carolina; so this week I called him to tell him that I was going to talk about him in my sermon, about what an ordinary, run-of-the-mill guy he truly is.

"Gee, thanks, Richard. And how are things in Dayton?"

I told him, and then asked him about his prayer in 1990, his original vision for the Super Bowl of Caring. "It was a gift, Richard, an absolute gift from God—the fruit of prayer, the fruit of my life experience—as a youth

pastor, as a sports fan, as someone who worked his way through college by working in a steel mill and saw just how close to the edge some of those families lived.”

I asked how it felt to see his vision become so successful. “It was never my vision—it was the youth, the church and churches—it was God’s. What I loved most, though, was working with youth—working together, seeing them go beyond themselves, losing themselves—losing all the anxieties of being a teenager (at least for a little while) in helping others, to see them claim the gifts God gave them, to see them becoming what God calls them to be. That’s what I loved—that’s what I love—most.”

Brad was the Director of Souper Bowl of Caring until 2009 when he took a call to serve as pastor at a church back in suburban Columbia, so I asked him about that. “Well, it had become mostly an administrative job, and there was a lot of travel, but I have to tell you, the Souper Bowl of Caring, as wonderful as it is . . . well, it’s 3000 miles wide and an inch deep. The local church may be only an inch wide but it can go 3000 miles deep—and what I saw going on with Souper Bowl I wanted to part of that again, year round, at a church because it goes deeper.”

And then he asked me about Westminster and our youth program. And I bragged on our church and our youth program and the advisors and the lock-in, and the youth choirs and the trip to Scotland. I probably went on a little, but he was nice enough to listen. And then I asked him for his favorite memory. “Oh, wow, there are so many . . . but I’ll tell you one (and this would be a good one for your sermon, Richard). . . It was in the late 1990’s and it was really beginning to take off, and the phone bank for groups to call in their amounts (Souper Bowl still has such a phone bank) was at the Public Television station in Columbia, and we had about 60 youth working it. I was working it, too. One afternoon, I picked up a call, and it was this guy, a youth advisor, working with the youth at a little Presbyterian church, a new church development with only 63 members, north of Chattanooga. And he had a really good number to report for a church of that size, and I told him that, and he went on and on about how Souper Bowl had really brought the church together, had really energized the youth. And I listened.

“And then a couple days later, this same youth advisor calls again and asks for me: now his church had teamed up with other churches in the area and he reports a new, much bigger number and he goes on and on about how much the youth loved meeting with—working together with—kids from other churches. And I listened.

“And then a couple of day after that, this same youth advisor calls again and asks for me: the churches had teamed up with the local Walmart, and Walmart agreed to match their amount—so now it’s double. And he goes on and on about how great it was for the kids to stand outside the Walmart holding their soup pots, and all the people they talked to, who could see the church at work, and how the employees would come out on their breaks and talk to them. And as he’s going on, I start to think to myself, ‘You know this is great, but this 800 number costs us money, and I need to answer some other calls.’ And then he says to me, ‘Brad, you know about two years ago I was playing softball for the church team, and we had a collision in the outfield, and well . . . I’m in a wheelchair now: I’ve lost the use of my arms and legs. And I have to tell you for these past two years I’ve been asking God ‘why am I still here?’ But this Souper Bowl has shown me that God still has a reason for my life.”

And then Brad told me that, today, this man is now a counselor for Health South helping other people, in situations like his, find the reason for their lives.

We are blind. If we leave here this morning seeing nothing but the kids in the back holding their soup pots (“You know, they do this every year for the Super Bowl; it all goes to the food bank.”), If we leave here this morning seeing nothing but that, then I tell you: we are blind. But we don’t have to look far to see God at work in the world, to see God’s glory in the world. As you leave here this morning, take a moment to look again, to look again at those kids holding their soup pots, I tell you, you will see God at work in the world, you will see the glory of God.

He is the light of the world. May all glory be to him.

Amen.