

Toronto United Mennonite Church, Sunday March 30
Inside-Out Kingdom: John 9
by Dr. Jeff Taylor

A few sermons ago Pastor Marilyn did a very cool exercise with simple chart paper where she “showed her work” - I think there may have been a Venn diagram involved (with intersecting circles). And the first thing she showed us was that the words of the bible have an historical context which can be very helpful to understand as we interpret and apply ancient holy words to modern life.

Now I was the most surprised person in the province when I learned 14 years ago that I was qualified to teach secondary History. I’ve never thought of myself as an historian and in fact I mostly teach the fun humanities courses like comparative religion, law, and civics (which will become clearer later in this sermon). But I guess after being in that environment for this long I too have become a bit of a nutter about historical context. And so I will attempt to convince you to be as fascinated as I am with the historical context of today’s story as well as with all the secret messaging going on in this in wonderfully crafted story.

This type of literature - by which I mean basically the whole bible - appeals tremendously to someone like me who is a strong Meyers-Briggs "N" - that is, an iNtuitive thinker - one who seeks to connect smaller things into a bigger picture. Making connections to form a big picture is how my brain naturally functions and I've become quite good at this over the years - so good that I can quite readily find connections even where they don't exist. I'll try not to go off any deep ends this morning, but applying the imagination to biblical interpretation is an ancient and honoured tradition in both Judaism and Christianity and, I would offer, is absolutely essential in hearing God speak across time and space. So on to it then.

In the scenes presented so ably by our acting readers and children's interpreter this morning, numerous characters are trying to figure out how the impossible could happen. For most what's impossible in this story is that a young man who had been blind his whole life could suddenly see. But for some in this story the thing that seems even more impossible than that a man's sight was restored is who is said to have restored it. You see in this story healing doesn't come from inside the places of holy power, but from outside entirely. And so this morning we will think about being inside and outside, asking along the

way “in which of those places is the light greater?” and “which of those directions are we being sent?”

The people who first heard John’s gospel would not have missed the theme of insider versus outsider in this story - it would have been hugely important to them in their context. Now here I will show a bit of my work and give credit, first to Tim Schmucker, who pointed me in the right direction on this when I gave a sermon sometime last year from this gospel and said that it’s first hearers were primarily non-Jewish Christians. It turns out that’s probably not the case. There is good evidence in the gospel itself that they were likely mostly Jewish. Now John’s original audience certainly was very Greek-ized (or Hellenized) culturally.

It was not at all unusual, even during Jesus’ earthly time, for educated Jewish people, or people from almost anywhere in the Mediterranean world, to be well-versed in the Greek language, arts, philosophy, and sciences. A version of the Jewish bible had been translated into Greek more than a century before Jesus’ birth and it’s not impossible that he may have read from the Greek Old Testament on some occasion.

The great Jewish rabbi and Christian missionary, Paul, was an excellent example of this Hellenized cosmopolitan type of Jew. Having been born in Turkey as a Roman citizen, educated in Hebrew, Greek, and most likely Latin, a world traveller - he was the obvious choice to spread the gospel of the Jewish Messiah as Lord of the universe to Greek speaking Jews and Gentiles outside of Palestine, indeed all the way to Rome.

By the time John wrote his gospel near the end of the first century, most Christians in the world were gentiles, but there were still many Jewish Christians who continued to worship as Jews, participating in the life of the Jewish synagogue. Those to whom John writes seem to have been mostly Hellenized Jews who believed in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and the mystical Logos (the "word," or "logic") of the universe. This way of being Jewish seems to have gotten them kicked out of the synagogue, expelled by their own leaders.

Now, we may be thinking to ourselves, "Big whoop, they can still worship with other Christians in the "church" right?" - not so fast! To these believers worshipping Jesus was at the heart of being Jewish and the synagogue was their church. The idea that Christianity was a new

replacement religion would have been a foreign idea to them. For them, this is an expulsion from their primary community of faith by their own people.

By now you are beginning to see in our story that John is telling the story of these expelled outsiders right back to them in the story of this man, now sighted, who is also expelled by the leaders of his synagogue because he sees things differently than they do. In this story we will see God choosing the outsider - the weak - to send to do God's work.

John reinforces the theme of the enlightened and sent outsider with several features: 1) Jesus is an outsider, even before our story begins; 2) those whose eyes are opened and are sent to do God's work should not be surprised if they find themselves on the outside of the religious power circle; and 3) even the water of healing and sending comes from the outside. Let's take each of these features of this story in turn.

1) Jesus is sent as an outsider: Throughout this gospel, starting with the very first words, Jesus is depicted as one coming to us from another place, another realm, as the divine logos - "sent by the Father" (as he says 51 times in

this gospel) to do his work. Just before our story from John, Jesus had been inside the temple (the place of holy power) arguing once again with “the Jews,” by which John probably means (in that case) certain Jewish leaders. Jesus had said something that implied that Abraham had known Jesus. When challenged about such an absurd claim, Jesus had responded with, “Before Abraham, I am.”

Now this isn't just bad translating, he did not say “Before Abraham, I was” - somehow claiming to be 1700 years old. He said, “I am” which any Jewish person would immediately recognize as the answer God had given to Moses at the burning bush when Moses asked, “who should I say sent me.” God had answered, “Say ‘I am’ has sent you.” By using this one key phrase Jesus had unequivocally claimed to be equal to God. It's clear that the Jewish leaders at the temple thought he was committing blasphemy because they attempted to stone him to death on the spot. It is right after being chased out of the temple that Jesus sees a man in need of sight. Those in this world who have been ejected to the outside, or who have always been outsiders, should keep an eye out for Jesus who is ready to meet fellow outsiders there.

2) The enlightened and sent ones will become or already are the outsiders: Having symbolically covered the blind man's eyes with the earth from which we all come, Jesus sent the blind man to wash away the imperfection, the impurity, of his blindness in the pool of Siloam. Do you know what the word Siloam means? It means "sent." The man was sent to be sent by the one whom "God has sent." This anointing of the weak to be sent to do God's work calls to mind other such cases: the calling of a tongue-tied Moses, the night-time calling of a very young Samuel to be God's prophet, and Samuel's anointing (many years later) of the almost overlooked scrawny shepherd boy David as the next king of Israel. "Man looks on the outside of a man, but God looks on the heart." But these deliverers, prophets, and kings all experienced at least seasons of expulsion, and so may we. They also each knew what it was to live inside the centers of power to the exclusion of others. We too, are a people of immense privilege, to the exclusion of others. We'll return to this. But notice the critical twist at the end of this story when our main character fully realizes who Jesus is and worships him, that those who had excluded both of them find themselves on the outside of the place of God's power: they overheard the conversation and are led to wonder and ask, "are we

the ones who are blind?" God will set a table before us and our cup will overflow.

And finally, 3) even the waters of healing and sending are outside waters. And here I am indebted to my wife Doreen, our children's time teacher today, who brought to my attention that, while the pool of Siloam is inside the old city walls of Jerusalem - King Hezekiah's wall - the spring that feeds that pool, the Gihon spring, comes from outside the city wall. Seven hundred years before Jesus King Hezekiah, knowing that the great Assyrian king Sennacherib was on the warpath heading for Egypt and ravaging the kingdom of Israel en route. Anticipating that Sennacherib would lay siege to Jerusalem, Hezekiah had an underground channel dug to bring water from the spring outside the city wall to the pool of Siloam on the inside to provide drinking water for the siege. So even the water that restored the sight of the blind man who was an outsider from birth and whose healing would only result in a further confirmation of that status was healed by outsider waters.

In telling the story in this way, with Jesus as an outsider, with the newly sighted man being expelled to the outside, and even referencing outsider waters, John assures his

beloved fellow disciples that, in their expulsion from their synagogue, they are in good company - in the company of Jesus from whom they have received enlightenment and by whom they have been sent in turn to do the work of him that sends us.

So, what is that work? What was Jesus' work? To meet those on the outskirts of power and to empower them? To walk carefully in the circles of power and advocate for those on the edges?

In what ways are we or have we been made outsiders? Has your faith cost you some credibility in an enlightenment culture which views the scientific and historical-critical methods as the only legitimate paths to wisdom and in which religious truth is dismissed out of hand, associated with some reactionary version of Christianity you would not own?

Has your commitment to the way of peace and life put you on the outs with a might-makes-right culture? With a world of sovereign nations that mostly gravitate around cultural homogeneity and guard territory and "national interests" with state-sanctioned homicide?

In attempting to live a life of simple pleasures, have you felt mocked by a culture pedaling heedless consumption, gross abuse of God's good earth, hyper-sexualization of our children, objectification of our daughters and sisters, and increasingly rampant corruption of the political class?

Have you been pushed to the outside by a majority government elected by a minority of the electorate; a government whose growing indifference to the fundamental rights of its own citizens, is matched only by its disdain of those, who like so many of our ancestors, come here in desperation as refugees only to be deprived of the right of a fair hearing or an appeal in the aftermath of an unfair one? A government determined to undo all that was done by governments of two parties over 60 years to earn Canada a reputation as a place of peace and justice, and as an honest and dispassionate broker in global disputes.

Young people in our country have all but given up on voting because the parties they favour are constantly repressed by an electoral system that grossly exaggerates the victory of the winners and the loss of the losers; and of course the party in power has no incentive to change a system that was so brilliant as to hand them a majority

government. So we citizens are shoved further and further to the edges of our own societies, relegated to being “consumers” and “tax payers” - only valuable as cogs in an economy that enriches the few far more than the many. Meanwhile the state and corporate powers collect more and more information about us to be turned against us in targeted commercialism and by creating a political climate of fear and intimidation, or worse yet, apathy; and we pathetically acquiesce to this invasion of our rights as God’s special creatures.

Life on the outskirts of power can be discouraging, sometimes it can feel hopeless. But know this: know that the Master of the Universe meets us exactly when we are on the edge, because that’s where she can be found in Jesus, who will take us through the dark valleys and deep shadows to safer pastures, and in the end, to the banquet table in the house of the Lord.

But let’s not kid ourselves: as much as we may be subject to seasons of expulsion by elite powers, we are, in the main, the elite of this planet. We do most of the earning and consuming on this planet, and that places us very much on the inside of the power structures with great responsibility to walk softly among our fellow global

citizens and upon the planet that hosts us. I will leave it to you to imagine ways in which we may have or are enjoying that power to the exclusion of others, as if to reap the rewards of wisely choosing to have been born in Canada, or to have come from a good family or at least a family of means, to have been born with light enough skin, or as a man, or as a tall person, or with symmetrical features. Everything we have is a gift for which we can take no credit, and so we are no more deserving of such lavish power as we enjoy than any other of our earthly cousins.

Let us then, whether on the inside or outside of the circles of power, remember where Jesus may best be found, from whence the healing waters flow, and who is the source of truth and light in our lives.