



University Christian Church – Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

What Do We Really Know?

Lent 4, a, March 2, 2008

John 9:1-41

I have Senator Haley to thank for the following story, very apropos for today, I think.

Here's the transcript of the ACTUAL radio conversation between the British and the Irish, off the coast of Kerry, Oct 98. Radio conversation released by the Chief of Naval Operations 10-10-01:

IRISH: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the South, to avoid a collision.

BRITISH: Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the North, to avoid a collision.

IRISH: Negative. You will have to divert your course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

BRITISH: This is the Captain of a British navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

IRISH: Negative. I say again. You will have to divert YOUR course.

BRITISH: THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER HMS BRITANNIA! THE SECOND LARGEST SHIP IN THE BRITISH ATLANTIC FLEET. WE ARE ACCOMPANIED BY THREE DESTROYERS, THREE CRUISERS, AND NUMEROUS SUPPORT VESSELS. I DEMAND THAT YOU CHANGE YOUR COURSE 15 DEGREES NORTH, I SAY AGAIN, THAT IS 15 DEGREES NORTH, OR COUNTER-MEASURES WILL BE UNDERTAKEN TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF THIS SHIP.

IRISH: We are a lighthouse. Your call.

Ooh, that one that had to hurt your pride if you were that British captain! What a glaring example of how communication and assumptions when inaccurate can get us into all kinds of trouble. As Proverbs 16:18 puts it: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

The truth is that what we think we know, not only can hurt us, it can blind us.

Certainly the very same thing is taking place in this morning's Gospel lesson from the Gospel of John. The various characters in the story are making decisions on the basis of what they "know" and of what they hope. In fact if you sit down and count the number of times the word KNOW appears in the longer segment of this reading this morning it appears eleven times. It's all about knowing.

The Pharisees in today's gospel believe that they had it all figured out. They knew the 623 laws that they had been taught and the ones that had been passed along all the way back to Moses. They understood that those people who chose not to follow the law, would be understood as sinners. And the category of sin and sinners was very important to the Pharisees. It was the basis of judgment that was critically important to them.

Though we may think it's an odd way of looking at things today. In those days they believed that someone who was suffering from a disability or a physical impairment was doing so because they were being punished by God. They believed in a God of justice such that if someone suffers, they are being punished for something. If you think back to the whole story of Job, that is the key activity -- Job's friends trying to prove that Job who

appeared to be a righteous man, was really a sinner in order to have to endure all the suffering that he did in that story.

In this morning's passage, the pharisaic assumption was that because this man was born blind, somebody sinned!

But as you can hear in our passage, Jesus doesn't agree. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."ⁱ

The thing that jumps out in the passage to me is how detrimental the Pharisees' assumptions are. Their assumptions -- that which they think they know for absolute sure -- that's what's getting them in trouble. The Pharisees believed that they had this system figured out, but their belief in that system blinded them. It actually never even occurred to them that their religious system might be wrong.

The Pharisees were most interested in purity and obeying the direction of God. Jesus was clearly more interested in compassion, even when that conflicted with the orderliness they had inherited from the law.

This might come as a word of warning to each of us. The Pharisees had good reason to believe that they understood what it was God wanted. And they had a pretty good idea of what purity looked like. Still, all this notwithstanding, they were found on the wrong side of truth. The reason -- of course -- they left no place in their system for an ongoing revelation, a new and powerful witness of what God really wanted, which is exactly what Jesus represented.

In our day, the same challenge should come to each of us in our various understandings. Do we have room for the new? Do we have a new possibility that we could be alert to?

Is our approach to God important enough & deep enough – on the one hand - to direct our lives in the world, to mold decisions....and- on the other hand-, at the same time, flexible enough that we can still be changed, challenged?

I think the basic truth is that our knowledge -- our very clear knowing, in the field of religion, is vastly smaller than we let on. We do know some things -- don't get me wrong -- but those things that we do actually, really know are limited.

Let's ask ourselves, what do we really know about God?

First hand, we know that there is mystery and wonder that comes to us in life. For many of us, we name that creative and sustaining force which stands behind mystery and wonder, “God.”

We have a Bible. The Bible purports to tell us a great many things about God. But if we are honest, in fact, a great many of the things that we are told about God appear to be contradicted in one part of the Bible by what is stated in another. It isn't, after all an encyclopedia of God. It is the record of how people have responded to a sense of God throughout thousands of years. And this Bible brings with it, its own admonitions not to overstep our claim to knowing. Here these words from the Apostle Paul in Rom. 12: 16, “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.”

Obviously different people sense different things. Obviously whole cultures see things differently. So when we say we know something about God because we have read about it in the Bible, we should at least be honest enough to say that our knowledge is secondhand.

Secondhand in the same way that the Pharisees knowledge was secondhand, and subject to being wrong because of our misinterpretation or any of a number of issues in its passing along the way to us.

Now, secondhand is not bad. If I ask you what is nine times nine, you will answer 81. But how many of you have ever really stopped to count out nine times nine pennies. The point is a nine times nine is demonstrable, but in many cases we've never bothered to test it out. In the religious sphere, sometimes if we bothered to test things out, we would be encouraged and empowered by the results.

- When we do unto others and we would have them do unto us, life is better.
- When we allow compassion to guide our daily actions, life is better.
- When we tell the truth lovingly, even when its hard, life is better.
- When we stop during the day frequently and thank God for the goodness that we have known that day, life is better.

In these ways we can take our secondhand knowledge and make it first hand, infinitely better!

One of the most interesting things about our knowledge when it comes to matters of religion is that because religion deals with ultimate matters, some of the areas that we are most interested in are really beyond such experimental reach. Many of us -- including myself believe quite fully that Denton Gossett who passed away a week ago is now in the loving presence of God. We believe that for many reasons.

The Bible tells us so.

Jesus -- himself -- the finest revelation of God's will and understanding that we have -- taught us so.

In addition, some among us have had what we will call noetic experiences, that confirm this sense of a life beyond this life.

Some of you -- will no doubt lift up the “life after death” research that's been taking place for several decades now; collecting information from people who were declared clinically dead and yet returned to life. All these things go together to paint a picture of a life after death that many of us therefore can hold with a degree of certainty that gives us great courage.

And yet, if we are to get very particular about our expectations about life after death, we must surely admit that most of it is speculation. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus was asked the question about whether people are given in marriage in the afterlifeⁱⁱ. That kind of thing, can never be more than second or third hand knowledge for us.

When we come into these realms of religion, it is clear why we must end up talking about faith. We are always going to be extrapolating from that which we have experienced to that which we desire or hope. We call it faith for a reason. It has not been, and won't be provable on this side of the great divide. Still, like the apostle Paul we lean forward running in the strength of faith, trusting that the God who has revealed to us enough in this life to live it well, even victoriously, will provide for us all that is necessary in the life to come as well.

All this said, perhaps a new recognition of the limits of our knowledge will give us a little more humility in conversation with those whose faith perspectives are different from our own. Perhaps- if we are open enough- we can learn from someone who has experienced some positive miracle, that can by their very experience change our own assumptions. Perhaps we will

learn from someone who is a light house, that we'd better change our course. And in those moments we may hear the Good News in the words of Jesus...that we don't have to figure it all out.

Luke 18: 16 ... "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

17 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

And,

Matt. 5: 5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

ⁱ John 9:3

ⁱⁱ Matt. 22:27ff; Mk 12:25ff; Luke 20:35ff.