

THE SENDING POOL
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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John 9:1-41

Thanks to everyone, including the entire congregation, who helped to read this passage as dramatic reading. Reading it this way brings out the power and pathos of the story.

I do have a confession to make, however: In preparing this script to be read, I left something out, left out a part of Holy Scripture. It is right there on the first page, the second speech of Jesus: “Go and wash in the pool of Siloam.” And the scripture adds in parentheses: “(which means ‘sent’).” You can check your pew Bible. It’s right there, but I left it out. Maybe because it was in parentheses I just overlooked it.

Granted, it doesn’t sound like a very big omission. Siloam means “sent.” Not such a big deal—the Gospel of John just filling us in on the meaning of the word. It means “sent.” The Greek word is *apostello*, and you can hear just by the saying of it that this is where we get our word “apostle.” And apostle is someone who is sent. “As the Father has sent me,” says Jesus, “so I send you.” (John 20:21). Someone has called this place where the blind man washes the Pool of Apostleship.¹ You bathe in this pool, and you become an apostle of Jesus, one who is sent by Jesus.

It might not be such a big deal, except that this is exactly what happens to this blind man. We call this a healing story, but the healing takes place in the first few verses. Most of the story is about the healed man explaining to this group and to that one what has happened. And here’s the main point: The blind man does it all by himself. After the healing, Jesus is nowhere to be found. In our reading, Jesus disappears on page one and doesn’t show up again until page four. It is the longest absence of Jesus in the fourth gospel.

So this poor man, formerly blind but now sighted, is on his own. The neighbors wonder if this is the same guy. After all, it’s not every day that you have people born blind who suddenly are able

¹ William Temple, *Readings in St. John’s Gospel* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1968), p. 150.

to see. The man admits he's the same person. "So where is this Jesus?" they ask. "I dunno," he replies.

All this activity finally catches the attention of the Pharisees. Ah, the Pharisees—how we love to make them the Bad Guys of the Bible, black hats and twirling mustaches and all. But the Pharisees were not considered bad guys in that day. They were in fact the goodest of Good Guys, the upholders of morality. Worshiping God, after all, is a serious business. You've got to be on your best behavior, and the Pharisees are going to see to it that everyone keeps the rules regarding worship and the observance of the Sabbath.

That's the problem: Jesus has healed this man on the Sabbath. The rule read this way: If someone had a life-threatening emergency on the Sabbath, then you could call 911 and have them rushed to the emergency room. But if the condition was not life-threatening, like, say, a man who had been blind all his life, then you were supposed to wait until Monday before you healed them. And Jesus had performed this non-life-threatening healing on the Sabbath.

Jesus is nowhere to be found, so the Pharisees grill the man with increasing intensity. "How did he heal you?" "He put mud on my eyes and I washed and now I see." They get to arguing among themselves: "He's got to be a sinner, this Jesus, since he healed on the Sabbath. . . . Yeah, but how could a sinner pull off a healing like that?" They turn back to the blind man: "What do you say about him?" "He's a prophet," says the man.

I picture the man, hearing those words come out of his mouth, and saying to himself: "Where did that come from?" Just a little while ago he was blind and didn't know from nothing. Now he's suddenly calling this Jesus a prophet.

The Pharisees call the parents, but they're scared to death of the morality police, and put it back on the man who had been healed. "He's of age. Ask him."

So they call him again: "We know this Jesus is a sinner." The man is no theologian. He doesn't understand all these categories that the Pharisees use. "Sinner, swimmer," he says. "All I know is that I was blind, and now I see."

"Wait a minute," retort the Pharisees. "You may be a disciple of this Jesus, but we're disciples of Moses. We don't know anything about this Jesus." The man responds with the longest speech in the story: "Here's an astonishing thing. You say you know all of this stuff, but you don't know about this man who healed me. This sort of thing doesn't happen every day. In fact, it hasn't happened since the world began. He's got to be from God."

Everyone in the room is holding their breath. Mr. Nobody from Nowheresville just finished lecturing the church Session that they don't know squat.² So of course they respond: "Are you through, buddy? We'll show you where you can go." And they boot him out.

So here's the track of this story: The man washes in the sending pool. He doesn't have a clue about Jesus. But the further it goes, the stronger his words become, from "I dunno," to "He is a prophet," to "He is from God." And finally, when Jesus meets him again, he confesses, "Lord, I believe." At the same time he has been kicked out of the synagogue and out of polite society by the guardians of morality. He's gotten closer to Jesus, and further away from polite religion.

Isn't that how the Christian life works? You don't wake up one day with all the theological answers, ready to expound on predestination or summarize the works of John Calvin. You grow into it, from "I dunno" to "I believe." It all starts at the sending pool. You wash, and then go out to defend Jesus to the world. "As the Father has sent me," says Jesus, "so I send you."

It's a growth in humility. You know you don't have the answers. You just know that Jesus has touched your life, that once you didn't see but now maybe you do. The problem with the Pharisees is that they have no humility. They are so confident that "we know, we know, we know." This man doesn't know anything except who gave him sight, so he's sticking up for Jesus, even when he's all by himself, even when it gets him in trouble to do it.

I have mentioned it before, but I think one of the best ways to think about the Christian life is to imagine yourself getting ready to go on stage in a play. Actors who have done that have said that standing just off stage during a play can actually be a calm and peaceful spot. Only the stage manager and other essential people are there. You're there in the semi-darkness. And just beyond you on the floor is the line made by the bright lights of the stage. And out there is the play, actors completely involved in remembering their lines and carrying the action forward. And all those people in the audience watching your every move.

But you're not out there. You're in the semi-darkness, cozy, safe. You could just stay there and never get involved in the play. But you're waiting for your cue, the line that will signal your time to step on stage. The line is spoken, and you take one step, just one step, and you're in it. Who knows what will happen. Maybe it will go well. Maybe you'll forget your lines and the whole thing will unravel and you'll look like a fool in front of all those people. You don't know. But it all starts with that one step.

For the blind man, it all starts with the one step: He washes in the sending pool, the pool of apostleship, and he's off on a whole new life. Before he knows it, he's lecturing the Pharisees. Who would have thought it?

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999), p. 75.

The great church leader Martin Luther never thought he would be leading a reformation. He was just tacking up a notice on the church door that he wanted to debate some of the things he had been reading in the Bible. One step.

Dietrich Bonhoffer never intended to be a martyr in Hitler's Germany. He left Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1939 to go back to Germany, even though his American friends urged him to stay. He needed to be with his friends. One step, and he ended up giving his life.

Martin Luther King was a young minister just getting started in his first church in Montgomery, Alabama. He was all set to have a dignified career in ministry. But then a delegation came to him one day and asked if he would like to help with a barely organized bus boycott they were trying to get together. And he said: Sure. One step.

In the early church they loved the story of the man born blind. Several paintings of it have been found on the walls of catacombs where Christians used to meet. When new believers would present themselves for baptism, the leader would read several passages in the Old Testament having to do with water. And then the leader would read this passage, about a man who had washed in the sending pool and had gone out as an apostle of Jesus.³ "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

You take one step. You wash in the sending pool, and it changes everything. You do not know where you will be sent as an apostle of Jesus. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

So wouldn't it be something if there really were a sending pool like that where you could wash, and it would make you an apostle of Jesus?

And wouldn't it be something if you were to wash there and find your own blindness and sin washed away? And wouldn't it be something if it would cause you to defend this Jesus and tell of this Jesus and live for this Jesus who had washed you and made you clean?

And if that were the case, and if you did wash in the sending pool, don't you think it would change your life?✠

³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 380-1.